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BEYOND AURORA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

By

RYAN IRELAND
B.A., Wright State University, 2008

2011
Wright State University

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2011

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL
April 12, 2011

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED
UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Ryan Ireland ENTITLED
Beyond Aurora BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL
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ABSTRACT

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2011. Beyond Aurora.

Set in 1888-9, this historical fiction narrative
chronicles the events leading up to, and following
the Martin brothers' failed quest for vengeance.
The brothers work as mercenaries for a Plains
sheriff before being sent into exile. They
eventually part ways and each of them spirals into
their own brand of madness.

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Preface

Throughout Bakhtin's essay about the novel in *The Dialogic Imagination*, he provides the reader with what appear to be multiple definitions of "novel." When viewed as separate definitions, they seem to conflict with one another. He starts on page 261 by defining the novel "as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice." On the next page he outright says a novel "can be defined as a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized." (This definition is preceded with a note that the "style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles.") The combining of styles he contends, "[t]hese distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel." (263) Within three pages, Bakhtin manages to define, re-define and refine his notion of a literary tradition that arguably dates back to Robinson Crusoe.

By the essay's end it becomes apparent that Bakhtin is actually building a continuous and ever-more-complicated definition of the novel. His definition is fluid, much like the utterances he describes as being a product of place and time. As a writer, it is easy to agree with this developing notion of what an extended narrative is defined as. My style (and my stylistic choices) changed during the composition process, depending on the situation and the speech of not just my characters, but also of myself. The voices changed with plot dynamic. Authorial intonation fluctuated as my relationship with the text itself developed. It's hard to find fault—or conflict—with Bakhtin's morphing definition of the novel.

The dialogic nature of the novel in general is born from a network, the inherent heteroglossia of the genre, as well as the multiple voices the author inhabits. In *Beyond Aurora*, dialogues between the authorial selves are no different from any other novel. What differentiates my novel—and most novels written since the advent of digital multimodalism—from novels written twenty years ago is born from how society and community are presently formed. Perhaps the biggest departure from the Bakhtinian model of dialogism is derived from the ecology from which this

particular novel was born. Even now, Bakhtin's definition of novel can continue to change with the development of new media.

Indeed, in what is termed by composition scholar Henry Jenkins as convergence culture, it has become increasingly difficult to limit the influence of one genre on another. The novel, like the other aesthetic forms that came before it, cannot exist in a vacuum. Just as the cacophonous choir of Bakhtin's heteroglossic voices gives shape to the narrative of the novel, the other major storytelling genres of today continuously mold the modern novel. Similarly, literary genres are constantly reshaped by the effects of heteroglossia.

Since the popularization of the Western as a literary genre, it has morphed due to societal climatology. As author and film professor Charles Derry noted during his lecture on stylized filmmaking in 2007, during the conflict in Vietnam, the Western notably shifted from a focus on achieving the American Dream through Manifest Destiny to illustrating specific social issues through metaphor. Additionally, Vietnam gave rise to the antihero as a viable protagonist. It is similar to the sudden change of film audience in the 1960s as described by Rose: "Studios were

still dominated by the men who had built them through the Silent Era and the Great Depression... These great enterprises were on the verge of collapse" (5). The only way the movie industry would be "saved" would be by the "rebel directors of New Hollywood."

The eclectic return to the Western in the last five years with films like *No Country for Old Men*, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* and this summer's *Cowboys Vs. Aliens* offer evidence of today's post-literate, postmodern culture—a culture that values convergence of genre and media. As Cormac McCarthy, author of *No Country for Old Men*, noted in an interview with *Wall Street Journal* correspondent John Jurgensen, "Eight-hundred page books that were written a hundred years ago just aren't going to be written anymore... I don't care how good it is, or how smart readers are. Their intentions, their brains are different." McCarthy, it should be mentioned, originally intended for *No Country for Old Men* to be a screenplay. So strong was the filmic aspect between the final novel and the screenplay that Ethan Coen admitted doing "nothing" to adapt the novel.

Since Edwin S. Porter created the first film—a Western no less—in 1903 with *The Great Train Robbery*, cowboys and

their heroics have seemed naturally conducive to the big screen. Since the conception of film, literary devices have been translated into filmic techniques. The rhetorical move of adapting books to movies has not been fully reciprocated though. While many books are adapted into films, the effect of film on the creation of literature is rarely noted by composition scholars and creative writers. Author and creative writing professor, Robert Olen Butler notes the value of acknowledging film's influence on the writing process by stating, "[b]ecause fiction writers are the writer-directors of the cinema of inner consciousness, you [sic] will need to develop the techniques of film as well" (64). The crossover from film into literature was not immediate though. Rose notes that it "took years for such [filmic] practices to become commonplace" (35). Up until D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, film emulated the conventions of the stage play. Directors, Rose says had yet to develop "a grammar of film... that took full advantage of the new medium's possibilities" (35). Composition theorist John Golden echoes the sentiment by noting how film "has a way of putting conflicting images together in such a way that the students can easily recognize the director" (88). Rose continues on his delineation of mimickery from one

medium to the next. While I did not have the vocabulary to describe my stylistic choices when I began composing my novel, I can see now that my major decisions were actually a part of the complex heteroglossia of inhabiting a multimodal ecology. In short, the narration of my novel needed to derive from the camera. The camera, after all, was how I experienced the narratological shaping of my childhood.

The heteroglossia of the novel itself is the crux of the narrative. As Bakhtin notes, "interaction with living rhetorical genres has never ceased; this interaction was perhaps no less intense than was the novel's interaction with the artistic genres" (269). While it seems like a bold claim, the main conflict of my novel actually comes from the print novel being written in a culture immersed in film as the major mode of storytelling, rather than the gunfights, bounties and whores that provide the immediate surface problems in my novel.

When I began to write my novel, I wanted the narrator to not only remain passive and nearly omniscient, but I also I wanted the narration to move as a camera. In short, I had hoped to emulate filmic technique through text. Whether I intended it or not (and I did not), part of the

novel's tension comes from the resistance of the novel to the film genre. In keeping with Bakhtin's idea of multiple voices shaping the narrative, I can acknowledge the various levels on which film and technology affected the shape of the story. In the plot itself, the telegraph becomes a key to securing bounties and communicating. Prior to the mention of the telegraph, characters in the novel simply spoke to one another. By allowing the telegraph to determine the characters' plotlines, I, as the author, was acknowledging the convoluted system of communication between my selves. The influence of the camera on postmodern readership is again addressed in section two of Part II, when Jack Patrick loses his eyesight. Just as I had intentionally narrated the novel from a camera point of view, I destroy this framework and blind my main character. The focus of the novel is lost in the absence of visuals, thus securing some of my theoretical underpinnings.

The final product—the following novel—is actually far from a definitive novel in the Bakhtinian sense. The narrative will continue to interact with voices and various sociological pressures and spur on new ideas not intended by the authorial voice. Ultimately the reader ends up being the writer of the text.

Prologue

Had a hard time hearing the yearling braying over the wind, the thunder. I was high enough up there that the rain was still wet, wasn't drying out like it usually does, not like down there in our camp. There was a flash of light and I saw the yearling all laid out on the stone table of the summit. Eyes like beads of silver, fur shined over with rain. Beautiful thing, horses are. That's what kept me here for so long—the horses, the peacefulness. Matt don't feel like I do about horses, stays because I'm here.

Another clap of thunder and this time the lightning came down like a rod, splashed off the rocks like it was water. Rain picked up, wind blowed so hard I thought it might knock me off the mountain all together, send me down into the lake. I got right up next to the horse, stroked his mane. Another flash, whole sky breaking apart, like the stars was crashing down. Fingers of lightning hit the water of the lake and I watched like I was caught in a dream. Spots in the water glowed for a second and then there was nothing. I looked at the horse again, laying there, braying, kicking. His teeth showed. I ran my hand down his neck, his shoulder, all the way down his leg, till

I felt the break in his coffin bone. Another flash and I saw it, a nub of white stuck out through the fur.

How that yearling made it up there's a mystery. Only thing for certain was that it wasn't gonna make it down alive. Didn't have my gun with me, really no cause to carry a gun on the island, so I couldn't shoot him. I pressed my hands into the belly of the horse. Arc of lightning crossed the sky—a whole long trail of white—and connected with the boulders nearby. I gave the horse a good shove and it brayed a little before the thunder drowned him out. Long fall down that side of the slope. Only thing I could do.

Shame, what I had to do. Soon as I shove him off the cliff the rain picked up. Never knew it to rain so heavy. Rain so bad I could hardly see a step ahead. Trail cut in the dirt bank of the slope washed right out, didn't even have to check to see if it was there. Just a mud slick now. Rocks slicked down with the rain too. There was another set of flashes right in a row, a whole lot of them. Long rumble of thunder too. Then a big one—one to shake the air. Like I got slapped right across the back. I hunkered between a couple boulders. Only good way left to get down this mountain's along the spine of it.

Began humping it over the rocks. Did the same thing over and over—scramble over the bald rock, wind near ripping the clothes right off me, then plunk down into the gap between that and the next boulder. Wait there till there'd be another flash, another clap and begin scrambling again. Rainwater channeling through there, between the rocks, slogged down my boots. Then an arc of light came down right on the rock I skittered over a second ago. Eyes felt like sand. Mouth tasted like copper. Loud too. Like the light was making the noise.

I's already kneeling there, hands fast up against my ears and I made a deal with God. He let me down off this mountain, I'd be a different man—I'd do whatever he told me to do. Hector, the fool by the shore, says a lot of men do this to get out of dying, they barter with God. Wasn't certain if God agreed. I pulled myself up out of the gap and saw it—the burning bush. Just some scrag, branches all dry out like bone. But it was afire, flaming so hard even the rain couldn't squelch it.

It was then that I knowed what needed to happen. God put that horse up there cause he needed me there. God put Hector at the shore and my ma in a whorehouse. He needed me to leave here and find the men he'd put somewhere else. I

called out and asked where I was to be going. The rain let up and the flashes where distant and brightened up the way before me. I could see out over all of creation. Then there was nothing.

Part I.

I.

i.

Hours had passed since Jack Patrick left for the peak of the mount. Night fell prematurely with the gathering of clouds bearing the burdens of rain. It rained, but the water droplets did not fall to the clump of greasewood scrub where Matt made camp. Instead the water evaporated into nothing a hundred feet above him. The rain found the dried tall grasses, the dirt of dust of the upper slopes, before it found Matt.

He cooked a thin stew of rabbit spiced with wild chives over a small fire. Stirring the gamey mixture with a stick, he looked up the spine of the mountain to where the summit should have been, to where it was masked with clouds. From time to time the clouds--amorphous swelling, but not moving--stoked with flashes of energy. The cowboy used these moments of enlightenment to search for his companion. But the explosions--like sun rays connecting directly to the earth in ragged spindles--did not reveal the waywards in the storm.

Jack Patrick had set out in the early afternoon. He had been wandering the lower skirt of the mountain that ran

in parallel arcs to the shoreline. Farther out, another shoreline of the mainland shown hazy. Ever farther out, more mountains—much taller, whitened with fresh, still-blowing snow—cropped the sky. Though Matt could not hear it, Jack Patrick swore he could hear the bray of yearling somewhere above them on the highest slopes of the mountain. The two men parted ways—one ascending the mount to find the lost foal, the other setting up camp to await the return of his companion.

When Jack Patrick descended the mountain he was a different man. There were flames in his eyes. He walked slowly. His clothes hung about him in a shrouded vestment. Vapor rose from his body in the heat of the darkened evening. When he spoke to Matt, he paused for the rumbles of thunder.

“Have a nice walk?” Matt asked. He did not look up from his campfire dinner.

“Yes,” Jack Patrick said.

The strangeness in Jack Patrick’s voice caused Matt to look at his companion.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

"You look different. Did you get caught in a storm cloud up there?"

Jack Patrick shook his head once. He crouched by the fire to warm his hands.

"Let me ask you something," he said. "Have you ever seen a horse summit any of the mountains on this island?"

There was thunder when Matt said no.

"Do you think" —his voice paused for another clap of thunder— "we were abandoned here?"

His companion waited a moment to answer the question. There was no thunder as he spoke.

"Mister Milton just gave us the job here. To be among the ranchers. No one left us."

"Yeah, they did."

"How do you figure?"

"Did we go anywhere?"

"No."

"We're still here."

"All right, but Ma and Daddy didn't choose this."

"The Ute squaw that cut Daddy's throat did."

"She's dead by now. They said she was a hag when it happened. Hector told me once when I ran into him on the

shore trail that she was brought back from the dead to kill him."

"Hector is a fool."

"True."

"What about the man who killed Ma?"

The two huddled close to the coals of the fire. Above them the rain was evaporating, soaking the mountaintops. Only arcs of electricity and reverberations of the broken sky traveled to the earth. "You asked me never to speak about it again."

"You're right. Her passing is nothing to dwell on."

"Think you might be ill. You've been out in the rain a long time. Colder up there where you were. You say you made the summit?"

Jack Patrick did not acknowledge Matt. He concentrated on the embered remains of the fire.

"Our father, our mother was taken from us. We are now confined to this island. One of the murderers is dead, the other still remains undelivered. I'll ask you again. Do you think we were abandoned here?"

Matt could see the form of Jack Patrick's face in the strobe of light flashing momentarily from the heavens. In

the darkness that followed a low growl unfolded across the creation.

That night the cowboys lay in the cave abode of their father. Outside it stormed, the rain connecting and falling to the earth. Streams of electricity splashed into the lake, pooling with light for brief seconds. Roaring salvo resounded in their cavernous home. The ground-thriving creatures—the mice, snakes, the insects, birds—came into the cave's protection.

"You still awake?" Matt asked.

"Yeah."

"Thought about what you asked me." There was silence that goaded him to speak again. "We should go ashore. ...Just to see if the stories are true. Go to Ma's whorehouse."

Matt was quiet then. It was the thunder that spoke next.

In return, Jack Patrick said the time had come to leave. They had a mission of sorts.

The storm grew more distant, until only the echoes of the tempest reached them. Outside the rain grew ever steadier. Occasional flashes revealed the night.

"We'll have to tell Mister Milton," Jack Patrick said.

"I know."

"We don't know where he lives."

"Blind Azariah will know. We'll ask him tomorrow."

Again it was quiet between the two men.

"What happened on the peak of the mountain?" Matt asked.

Another flash revealed a prong horn antelope at the mouth of the cave. His hooves planted firmly on the rock, his head turned backward over his shoulder. His eyes pitted dark and set into his head. In the whitened light he appeared as a wraith of a past sacrifice. Shadows darker than before regained the night.

The next morning the men gathered their few possessions and packed them into saddlebags, slinging them over the horses.

"What are we doing?" Matt asked. He'd quit loading his saddlebag.

"Leaving."

"Yeah, but for what? Are we just making excuses to do to other people what was done to us?"

"No. There's no justice to the situation."

"How do you know?"

Jack Patrick stopped his packing. He studied the shoreline, where out in the distance a few animals grazed.

"On this island there is no law except the natural order of life, so Daddy's murder went on unnoticed without a trial or a manhunt, just as a legend."

"What are you saying?" Matt asked.

"It's like this. In the towns, whores like Ma are not treated as people because of what they do for money—for survival. What a whore does is natural. We're the result of that. Her death was not natural—what came before was the work of an animal."

"You're talking about finding the man who killed Ma?"

"Yeah," Jack Patrick said. "I am."

"And killing him."

"That's right."

"That'll settle this for you?"

"Probably not."

"Then why are we leaving?" Matt asked.

Jack Patrick kept his sights set where the water met the shore, each as deadened as its counterpart. He took off his hat.

"Out here," he said. "On this island, there is natural order. An animal with blood from its kill soaked into its fur becomes prey itself. If a baby is attacked, its mother acts on instinct to kill the attacker. The meek use a disguise, camouflage, to flee from predators. The lesser creatures expose weakness. They humble the brutal. Even unwanted fornication is a natural beastly act for which there is repercussion. There is no need for justice."

"So the natural order you talk about will take care of Ma's killer. There's no need for us to do the deed."

"No. Cities are unnatural places. Murder in cold blood is an unnatural, unholy act for which there is no natural response. That is why when all was done, man created justice. "

"All right," Matt conceded.

They stood facing each other, squinting in the early morning sunlight.

"Anything else?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Yeah, you taking your rifle?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"We're gonna have to kill something before this is all over with. You bringing your pistols?"

"Of course."

"Do you know how to load them?"

"Just pack your damn rifle."

ii.

Blind Azariah lived in a lean-to on the far side of Molly's Nipple, a south peak on the island. He lived in the shade of the mountain, though he could not see the adumbration. For him the world was a shadow cast upon itself. He dwelt where the rocks were cool to the touch. The lore surrounding his blindness stated it was from an encounter he had with god. He lived, but his sight perished. He ate jarred peaches as the cowboys rode up to the encampment. The crusted fruits were gummed into pieces inside his mouth after being slived through his lips.

"Who is that?" he called. The saab of his eyes gleamed lustrous against his skin.

"It's Jack Patrick."

"Is Matt with you?"

"Yes."

"Well, come on then," the old man said. He beckoned them. When he stood he used his staff. He set the table—an

overturned crate— and their feast was a tin of fish. Dark alcohol was passed around, sipped from the bottle.

"Well," he said once the meal was finished. "No one sees me without reason."

Jack Patrick spoke. "We need to go see Mister Milton."

"No one sees Mister Milton unless they are in need of help."

Jack Patrick laughed. "No, that's not it," he said. "We're leaving the island."

"Yes, that is the other time men talk to Mister Milton—when they are departing. It is right that you should tell him about your decision."

The cowboys nodded in agreement. "We need to know where he lives."

"Oh. North."

"Yes, but we need to know where exactly."

"In a town called Eden, off the island, you know. It is in a fruitful valley between the rivers. He has a large house. The walkway is laid with flat rocks. His house is on a hill. You two have been favorites of his. He will miss you."

"How do you know?"

"You would not have bore the winters as well as you had. He must have seen you were descendants of Daddy Stump."

The men finished eating, at which time Blind Azariah told them to stay at the Fielding Garr Ranch. If they did a fair week's worth of work, they would earn passage on the boat to the shore.

"I know the ranch. They are the mormons with all the horses."

"Yes, them. They are good people."

Jack Patrick nodded. He thanked the old man. The old man told them god speed and they departed.

As instructed, they stayed at the ranch down by the shoreline. The structures were foundation-laid, planked, bricked walls with glassed windows, porches, chimneys. Other ranch hands from the morman clans dressed in jeans, shirts with buttons, praying over their food at night. They ate off plates. The meat in their meals was cooked through, steaming served with cornmeal. At night they slept on beds.

Jack Patrick helped wrangle the wild horses in the corral, breaking them into work horses. He rode them, whipping at their hindquarters with a short length of rope.

The horses bucked violently and he was thrown to the ground on a regular basis.

Matt sheared the sheep in the barn. When he emerged at night, the fine hairs of wool linted his body, the unshorn hair of his own face.

Both of the cowboys slept hard in the small house with the other ranch hands. They did not talk before resting. There were only the sounds of slumber--the snoring, the roped frames of the beds creaking, air escaping through the lips of the temporarily dead. When they woke, they would go to the springhouse, the coolest spot on the farm. They would drink to content their thirst before heading into the break of day.

After six days of labor, one of the family came from the house. He was a lean man with a genial smile. He came down to the springhouse.

"You two need a ride to the other shore?"

Jack Patrick and Matt nodded.

"I have a boat ready. Going over to the shore for rations. I believe you've both earned your passage."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure. I'll send my son to the dock right after breakfast at the house. You have both eaten with the other farm hands?"

"Yes."

"My son, he'll need some help with the animals, with getting the supplies off the boat."

The brothers assured the man such a deed would be of no conflict.

"Good. Wait there by the dock."

They crossed the lake in a flat-bottomed boat crowded with livestock, sacks, bags of wool, the men themselves.

Historically, men often capsized in the lake, losing the things they transported. Lost livestock, seeds, medicine for a dying man's wife, all littered the shallow expansive seemingly never-ending, salt-encrusted floor of the lake.

The capsized men never died themselves. They managed to survive the short storms that stirred the waters quickly into choppy waves. When they came back ashore to the island, they were without their cargo. There were no seeds to plant, no livestock to graze the stubble grasses in autumn or the long grasses in spring. On one occasion a man's wife died as she awaited her medication.

Today the waters were plaintive, rank with sulphur. Gulls circled above, leaving and returning to the island. The boat passed slowly from nether shore to mainland, the island shrinking, then reflected double its size upon the water. The herds they had watched over became less distinct, like shadows of clouds confined to the land as distant fleeting flocks.

The boat landed in a marsh of reeds—long grasses, dead grasses having grown too close to the lake water. The boatman moored his vessel with a stake to the shore. Beasts were led off the boat. Bags of wool and sacks of seed were unloaded. A few gulls lifted into flight as the men worked. Where the water met the soil there was no mud, only the washed crystallization of salt on dirt. When the horses were led off the boat, they made no impression on the new world. They did not eat of the grasses on the shore.

"The horses are yours," the boatman said.

"That so?"

"Yes."

"Well, thank you."

"Not my call."

"Right."

The cowboys looked to one another.

"You know the way into Kaysville?" Jack Patrick asked. "We were going to stop there before heading on to Mister Milton's place."

"Take the trail," the boatman said without turning around. "It's about a mile."

Indeed there was a parting of the grasses in the marsh. The grasses combed in opposite directions, unmoved by any breeze. The exposed earth blended an even tone with the surrounding vestiges of life. Great jagged peaks loomed before the men. The cowboys had never seen the mainland mountains this close. They appeared to be only short distance away--white mammoth things just beyond the grasses. But the trail led past a couple gnarled trees on the way into Kaysville. Much farther on, the trail began its ascent into the mountains.

iii.

Whores were difficult to find in Kaysville, as it seemed to be a town constructed on virtue. It was outside the city limits, in a newly-named parasite town of Layton, did a brothel exist. When Matt asked the men of Kaysville where he could find a decent whore, they responded by shading their eyes with the brims of their hats. They

sauntered on without acknowledgment. The cowboys ended up at the periphery of Kaysville, just inside Layton at an inn—the only one that would take them. In the great room of the inn, women clad in rags of lace with strands of hair strewn across their faces sat with their legs spread or crossed.

"You boys looking for a ride?" one called.

"Just got off the trail actually," Jack Patrick said.

"Looking for a lay then?"

"Looking for a whorehouse," Matt said.

"No whores here," one of the women said. She pulled a strap up over her shoulder pressing her breast into her chest.

"Right," another woman agreed. "Just ladies."

"Oh," Matt said. "I understand."

Some of the women giggled when he said this, others pulled at the slackened bands of their clothing.

"Are any of you older whores?" Jack Patrick asked.

"We got most any type you want," a women called from a doorway at the back of the great room. All in the room turned to look at the woman. She was a hag. Her hair was stringy and uncombed. A rash of warts ate back into her

hairline. One bulbous protruding eye contrasted her other lazy eye. But her lips were nearly perfect.

"Not from around here? Looking for some motherly love? I got it. Got a couple of years on these girls, I do. Only take you fellas one at a time though."

"We're from the island. Our ma was a whore in these parts. We wanted to find a woman who might know her."

The other girls dispersed, going to the liquor cabinet or to the newest man who came in the door.

"The island?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

"Daddy Stump's boys?"

"That's right."

The woman's hands clasped around the men's faces, a hand on each of their cheeks. The cold metal of her rings stung through the hair of their beards. "Yes. I do see some of Daddy Stump in you both. You more than the other. Come in," she said. "I knew your ma well."

The men followed her to an office just off the parlor. Sawdust clumped to the moist spots on the floor. She sat behind a desk, the men before her.

"I can get you a drink," she said. They refused. The woman poured herself a drink from a clear bottle with wavy glass.

"She was a favorite of his, your ma was. Only one he ever wanted."

"Oh."

"He died before you two were born. He left the island to go south. Stabbed by that Indian witch."

"He didn't want to see his sons?"

"He had no idea he was going to have sons."

"Oh." Jack Patrick sat in silence with his head bowed.

"He wandered, your father did. He came here only on occasion. Then he would speak only to your ma, rarely to anyone else. Spent most of his time on that island. Came here when he could get passage from one of the homesteaders."

"You said you knew our mother well."

"Yes. She was one of our better ladies around here. Your father may have been a hermit of an old man, but he had an eye for lasses. Usually she would only take nice men, regal men. Somehow Daddy Stump got his way with her—either by charm or by money, she was a fool for both—got her pregnant with you two."

"Were we born here?" he asked.

"Yes. Upstairs in her room. I believe Matt was the first born."

"So we lived here?"

The woman drank directly from the bottle now. "For a while yes. You were no more than a year old when she was killed. Then we sent you to the island your father was from. There were homesteaders, ranchers to watch over you. Mister Milton to watch over you from afar."

"Do you recall the man who killed her?"

A bead of liquor dribbled from the corner of the woman's mouth as she drank.

"Yes. Yes I remember him. A man from California. He arrived too late for the gold rush, too late for the silver. All that was left was lead. He made enough in lead to come back out this way. Said he was going to Hamilton County out in Nebraska. Thought he was going to make it rich out there. He came in here for the same thing every man who comes in here wants. Your ma was the only one who fit his requirements."

As the woman polished the last of the liquid from the bottle off, the cowboys looked to one another.

"Requirements?"

"Neither of you had been weaned yet."

The men did not move. They did not speak.

The woman leaned over her desk. Her breath was putrid with liquor. "This man I am telling you about was looking for a milking woman—that was his pleasure."

"Ma'am?"

"A woman, like any other animal, produces milk after having a child. Your ma was our only milking whore since neither of you had yet been weaned."

"Why would a man want—"

Jack Patrick interrupted his brother. "He killed her?"

The aged whore shook her head half in slumber, half in stupor. "He choked her in the throes of passion as they say. He left before we knew what he had done."

"It was an accident?" Matt asked.

Jack Patrick asked if the sheriff had been called.

"Yes," the woman said. "Layton didn't have a sheriff yet, so we got the one from Kaysville. He put a twenty dollar bounty on the man. The price of a dead whore, that's what he told me."

Since the single rooms were all in use, the cowboys took beds in the bunkhouse. When the old whore offered them

whores of their own, Matt said yes then chose her. They went to her room where squeals, grunts, thrusts of lust resounded through the plank wood doors as muted cries. They resounded down the narrow hall to the bunkhouse.

The older whore assumed Jack Patrick would want a woman of his own. She sent a younger whore to the bunkhouse where Jack Patrick lay without company. The girl assured him the service was on the house and crawled into bed next to him. With his eyes wide open in the darkness, the sleeping harlot by his side, Jack Patrick had declined her offers--the stroking at the crotch of his pants, the pulling of his hair. He had run his fingers over the skin of her cheek, told her to be quiet, be still so he could hear her breathe, feel her lungs thrust, then echo in the caverns of her body. Now she slept. The clothes still upon her body remained unwrinkled. Her limbs twitched in response to her dreams, ruffling the folds of her skirt.

Outside, through the dirty windowpane, the night was without moon or cloud cover. Somewhere beyond, the island mountains still loomed. Though the stars burned down like holes seared in the night, their radiance was tarnished, diminished, by the kerosene lamp glow.

The cries from down the hall ceased, making the sleeping whore's breaths more audible. Jack Patrick propped himself up on one elbow to study her. But the light of the stars was lost here too. Her beauty also disappeared in the ether of night.

Morning came slowly, refulgent through the milky windowpane. Jack Patrick awakened without the whore by his side. Instead Matt stood in the center of the room fastening his gun belt. He had come back to the room in the early morning, after his romp with the older whore.

"Breakfast is made," Matt said. "It's in the kitchen."

"We're leaving then?"

"To Nebraska. I have a bounty paper for Ma's killer."

Jack Patrick nodded, then said they would need a guide.

"First, we need to tell Mister Milton."

Jack Patrick looked out the window, straining to see the mountains of the island. Even now, in the daylight's hours, the peaks became obscured by the glare, the scattering diasporic rays of the sun. There was laughter of women from down the hall. The smell of coffee writhed in

the air. The whore he had laid with would have washed her hair by now. Now it would smell of wildflower.

iv.

They departed the whorehouse midmorning without ceremony or farewell. It was a two-day ride to Eden. But the men swung in an arc eastward, then back west to avoid the cities of Ogden, Uintah, the railroads with their great clamoring heaps of cogs steaming towards predestination. They rode out into the wild, then came on their return to a small town untouched by the outer forces of the world. Unlike the more massive towns, this hamlet did not destroy to create, but created within the reserve of the forest. Once the cowboys realized they were indeed in a town, Jack Patrick remarked to his brother that this must surely be Eden.

The pathway to Mister Milton's house looked to be a seasonal creek dried up for the moment with flat stones paving their way to his porch. A horseshoe hung above the door. When they knocked upon the door, the echo resounded in the home. A man with olive skin and slitted eyes answered the door, showed them to a study. Mister Milton

sat behind a desk. The windows behind him allowed him to be the all seeing eyes over the creation spread below. The cowboys stood muddled before him.

"Please sit down."

Jack Patrick opened his mouth to speak.

"No," Mister Milton said. "I insist. It is only furniture. You do look weary. Sit."

He reached into his coat, taking out a pack of cigarettes.

"Here," he said. He set them at the edge of his desk within the cowboys' reach. "Those came from the east coast. They are very fine. Go ahead have one."

Neither one moved.

"I prefer the pipe myself." He gestured to the meerschaum in a stand next to his lamp.

"Sir—"

"Mister Milton is fine."

"Yes. Mister Milton, my name is Jack Patrick Martin. This here is Matt, my brother."

"I know. I have watched you boys from afar. You are easily the best of my wranglers. Your father—the man everyone calls Daddy Stump—was an acquaintance of mine."

"I never knew."

"You could not. You were both raised by your mama, just long enough to be weaned from what I understand--"

The cowboys diverted their eyes to feign a shame they did not feel.

"Please, gentlemen, your pedigree is no secret to me. I knew of you before you were born."

Mister Milton struck a paper match. He lifted the pipe from its rack, lighting it. He puffed until the sweet incense of tobacco filled the sanctuary.

"How'd you meet our father?"

"We met before the Fielding Garr Ranch was ever built, in the same spot as the sweet freshwater spring still flows. We used to sit in the shade of the cottonwood trees, conversing into the night. He was a good man then."

"Then?"

Mister Milton's lips puckered around the bit of the pipe, parting slightly, small wafts of smoked air emerging. "Yes," he said. "Then. He was very much like the both of you. He was in the same line of work--only back then I was not affiliated with the church. It was also before the church turned its tithing herd loose. When we found you it was to help manage what was publicly called a finished

business. I knew him before there were sides to religion. There was really only one sin—one sin in my eyes anyways.”

Mister Milton tamped the ash in the bowl puffing again. “He violated it.”

“What did he do?”

“You have to understand that to me this was never like cattle rustling, horse thieving or whatever the law calls it. There are so few things to cherish in a world like ours. I love horses. When they were turned loose by the church I was overjoyed. I cried that night. You see, boys, god’s greatest creation is the horse. Their majesty is unmatched, even by faster forms of travel or more exotic fauna. They elevate humans beyond their status. Our job on earth is stewardship.”

“He started killing horses.”

“Yes.”

“Did he have a reason?”

He hunted them. ...Suppose it was to prove his dominance over the beasts the island. I saw him shoot horses, leaving them twisting, braying out before death. Then the coyotes came. He shot them too. More bloodlust.”

“Oh.”

"Suppose that's all there really is in this world: blood and lust." He pondered his own musing for a moment. "I do not want you boys thinking I am a sentimental man. I am not necessarily philosophical either. ...But I am practical. The church entrusted us to watch over their private flock of horses and he betrayed them. It goes deeper than my love of horses. His crimes were an affront to the natural order of things."

The men sat in silence for a long while, each thinking his own thoughts. One of the cowboys leaned forward taking a cigarette from the proffered box. He lit it with a paper match. The other spoke.

"So, then you came to find this sinner's sons, offering them jobs to work with horses."

"Perhaps I thought I could save you both."

"Because our parents were what they were."

"Yes. But now I know the time has come. Men only come to me for one reason. May I ask why you are leaving the island?"

Jack Patrick answered that it was justice.

"Weighty indeed." Mister Milton opened the side drawer of his desk procuring a small box with stars lathed in a constellation into its lid. "I want you to know leaving the

island means surrendering the protections I can offer you. Among the dead waters of the lake you were more alive than you will be otherwise out here. You had domain over the beast of the field, the birds of the heavens, the flora beneath. Separated from the land of your father, I can offer little more than the wages you have earned. I can give you a blessing to do well."

"That's fair enough," the cowboys agreed.

Mister Milton opened the starred box. The constellation was the big dipper. He gave the boys their money.

"I suppose I can give you one last thing," he said.

He took a sheet of paper from the stack on his desk. It too was emblazoned with stars. He wrote on it in ink. When he finished writing, he folded the paper, put it into an envelope. He sealed the envelope with wax, stamping it with a V.

"Take this with you. Go south to the Fishlake Woods, past Scipio. Inquire about a priest to be your guide. He will ask you for this letter. Deliver it to him."

II.

i.

Just as the men had ridden north to Mister Milton's, they rode south. Again, they followed a circuitous route, avoiding the smaller cities fed by lesser rail lines. They crossed patched lands that alternated between fecund pine woods, then desolate shadowless lands littered with ragged plants--places where remnants of life were dusted over by the wind. The men traveled ceaselessly through the nights with no one patch of land lasting for more than a half of a day.

The Fishlake Woods proved to be dark, bountiful with secret life. Bandit animals scurried away under the cover of brush, leaving only the swaying of boughs in low-hanging pine trees. There was a gentle rush of two streams that met, forming the steeper banks of a larger river.

The men led their horses by the bits, under the boughs, through the gossamer-laced trail. Pine cones, needles, sticks, crackled under the feet of the men and their beasts.

"We should forage the stream up here where it is less deep," Matt suggested.

"Yeah," Jack Patrick said. "That would be a good idea."

The men led their horses down the gentle sloping bank to the stream's edge.

"We could ride across it," Jack Patrick said. "It won't be that deep."

The two men mounted their horses, rode across the water. In the clearing of the trees provided by the river, a light smoke appeared above the pines. With its visual inception the smell of the wood smoke manifested in the men's nostrils. Daylight was falling quickly in the thick woods, the sun's rays sifting, filtering, barely penetrating through the branches.

"You think we should find where that smoke is coming from?" Jack Patrick asked.

"It's getting dark," Matt replied. "If there is hospitality in these woods, then I would like a home-cooked meal."

"Perhaps they'll know where to find this priest."

"Maybe."

The two men rode towards the sweet resin-laden smoke, to where a cabin was located. The billows of the white smoke boiled from a small squat structure made of stone.

"They're smoking some fish," Matt said.

"Where do you suppose they are?"

"Watching us."

Their heads turned to study the foliage about them. It rustled with the scurries of its hidden soldiers. A small clearing next to a scrag tree had a small oblong mound with a lashed cross. Jack Patrick turned to Matt.

"Take your hand off your gun," he said.

Matt's hand, which had been resting on the butt of his pistol, slid deftly to his side. There was another rustle in the brush. A man appeared before them. His eyes were enlarged by the spectacles he was wearing.

"You boys in need of something?" he asked.

"Looking for a place to spend the night. The woods is dark. You might be able to spare us a meal."

"Passing through are you?"

"We are looking for someone."

"You are bounty men?"

"Not yet."

"All right then. You can come in. It is fish tonight. Mackinaw. Leave your guns—your boots too—by the door."

Each man ate off a plank of wood using a knife, feeding bits of fish to his mouth with his fingers. The filets of fish were rubbed, sugared with salt mixed in a hint of cloves, though stale with age. The meat pulled apart, tender pink into flakes of flesh. Matt's flesh was especially boney, with little slivers of osseous matter, like razor hairs in the meat. As the bones broke in his mouth they gnashed upon the stones of his teeth, piercing his gums. The bitter coppered taste of blood washed over the fish.

"Who is it then you are looking for?" the man asked. He held the knife in his fist, picking the tip at the hollow spaces between his teeth.

"A priest," Jack Patrick said.

The man laid his knife upon the board. "I know of a priest."

"I am to give him this letter." Jack Patrick took the envelope, now tattered, soiled. "He is to be our guide."

The man's eyes widened, magnified in his spectacles. When he spoke, he pointed at the men. "This priest, if he is the one I know of, will only lead you astray."

Jack Patrick looked to Matt. Matt chewed slow and swallowed hard. He looked as if he might say something, but sat tight-lipped instead, sawing at another piece of fish.

"So you know of this priest," Jack Patrick said.

"Yeah, he—I know him all right. He—I shot him in the leg."

"You shot a priest."

"He whored out my wife. So I shot him."

"Oh."

The man took a deep breath. "You see, my wife she would go into town, into Scipio, to gamble." Spittle sprung from the man's lips as he spoke. "There is a discreet parlor there. I was not completely opposed because she very often came back with more than what she left with. Then, much like you all, the priest shows up in these woods. You can see why I am distrusting of strangers.... He says he belongs to the morman church. I guess my wife never visited a church while she was going to Scipio. She felt the need to confess to this man behind my back. She tells him she does not love me. I knew this already. When it was just the two of us there was no need for love."

The man looked from one cowboy to the other, squinting, then continued to speak.

"Well, she borrowed a hundred dollars from the priest. She had debts she never told me about. The hundred dollars was actually mine. The priest had borrowed the money from me, promising to repay it. When I asked him for the money back he told me it was given to my wife, which was true. She slept with him, humping him behind my back. He left only after I caught them fornicating. I shot him in the ass while he was on top of her. She tried to tell me it was his payment for being such a long house guest. I knocked two of her teeth out. Then she offered to repay the debt she owed me in the very same bed she leched in with that priest."

The remains of the mackinaw on Jack Patrick's plank of wood sat raw, turned cold in the course of the tale. "Your wife left then?"

The man looked down to the bones of his own fish strewn on the table.

"Yes, she left," he said. Then after a moment he said, "I will give you a hundred dollars each if you kill that priest."

"How would we know if it is the same priest?"

"He had dark hair, fair skin, a little taller than me."

"How long ago did this happen? Suppose he has gone gray, his skin is now tanned, his back broken, crooked with age."

The man nodded. "You are right. It was some time ago."

"You know his name?"

"I only know him by his false name, the one he gave us when he claimed to be morman. It was Judah."

"He could be dead by now, a man like that."

"Yes, that could be, but he was also very clever."

"What about your wife?" Matt asked. His teeth were stained pink with his own blood so they matched the flesh of the mackinaw.

The man opened his mouth, his eyes wide behind his spectacles.

Jack Patrick spoke first. "There will be no bounty on a woman. ...Something's got to remain sacred."

The man nodded. He sighed to himself.

The men drank an amber liquor from a flat, tall bottle. It burned in Jack Patrick's throat. It stung in the wounds of Matt's mouth. In all three men it caused a deep slumber with vivid dreams.

The cowboys awoke before the man himself awakened. The man sat slumped in his chair at the table, dreams circulating in his head.

"Should we go?" Jack Patrick asked.

Matt rubbed his forehead with the heels of his hands.
"Yeah."

The men clandestinely gathered their belongings, put on their boots. Their horses were hitched outside. The sun showed bright through the clearing of trees where the cabin sat. Jack Patrick drew his rifle from the side of the saddle and checked the chamber. "Check your bags," he told Matt. He set the rifle on the railing of the porch. Matt looked in his knapsack and saddle bags. "Nothing out of place," he said.

Matt nodded. "That grave," he said.

"I know," Jack Patrick said. He mounted his horse.
"Let's go."

The two rode south as the man had instructed them the night before. The morning now in the forest was resplendent, gleaming in the rivers, glowing softly in the lush of leaves. A sheen coruscated off the horses' fur. The two on horseback crossed a creek.

"I forgot my rifle," Jack Patrick said. "I left it at the cabin."

Matt nodded. "I can wait."

"Just go ahead slowly. I'll catch up."

Jack Patrick pulled hard on his horse's reins, galloping back into the wood of needle-leaved evergreen trees on the far side of the creek.

Sometime later, as Matt was passing through a patch of wildflowers growing in the absence of the shaded trail, the rapport of a gunshot resounded. He made camp in the forest waiting for Jack Patrick's return. When his brother returned some time later, they were silent.

"Did you test fire the rifle or something?" Matt asked.

Jack Patrick sat quietly for a moment. "You heard the gunshot."

"Yeah."

"...Yeah, I test fired the gun. It worked true."

It was twilight then. And the two men went to sleep in the darkness.

ii.

The way into the Fishlake Lake was a small, worn trail. Branches grappled at the sides of the cowboy's horses. The hooves of the horses crushed pinecones. A stretch of calm blue water scintillated through the pines. The cowboys rode to the lake's edge to let their horses water. Full, lush-laden boughs of conifers sifted together in hushed ruffles. The horses lapped at the water.

"Where do you suppose he is?" Jack Patrick asked.

Matt studied the shoreline. "Think it would be wise to ride the edge here? See if we might find him."

"We might be able to call out his name," Jack Patrick said. "It's quiet enough."

"I'd rather ride."

The men yawed their horses from the water. They had ridden a short distance when they drew their horses back by the bits telling them to stop.

"What is that?" Jack Patrick asked.

At the water's edge there was a steep bank where the roots of the trees crawled out, hanging exposed. From under the tangle of roots, a light projected.

"Is that a hovel?"

They rode toward the light. Jack Patrick only stopped when Matt touched his arm, pointing to the woods beyond the

franciscan shelter. A man in brown sackcloth stood, gesticulating wildly, chanting nonsense verse. His long, dark beard wagged. His naked bulbous head rolled about.

"Sir," Matt called.

The man opened his eyes.

"Amen," he said. He looked at the two men clapping his hands saying, "Who says god does not answer your prayers?"

"You two must be looking for me. No one finds me otherwise. You must be famished. I know I am a few days ride from anything. I have some stew on the fire in my humble home. Let me get it. We shall eat outside—here—as long as the weather holds out. Smells as if it might rain." The man turned to run so his sandals clapped against his feet.

"All right then," Matt said. They dismounted.

Indeed the evening smelled of rain. Growls of thunder menaced in the darkened skies. The men sat on the ground, for it was soft enough with decaying pine needles. Their stew was thick gravy made from small game fat with cut tubers, scraps of meat, nuts. The man of the cloth gave his spoon and fork to his visitors. He himself drank from a bowl, so his beard was strewn with bits of food.

"I suppose you have a letter for me," he said between gulps.

Jack Patrick reached into his vest, withdrew the letter and handed it to the man. The priest tore open the letter, shaking his head while he read it. He refolded it and set it in his lap.

"I am Brother Aaron," he said. "You need a guide. I will be happy to take you as far as you care to go."

"We're going to Aurora, Nebraska. If you can just get us through Colorado that would be enough."

"What is in Aurora?"

"We are looking for a killer."

"You are bounty men."

"No," Matt said. "We are ranchers."

"I know," the priest said. "But you want to hunt bounty so you are bounty men then."

"Yes."

"If we leave at sunrise tomorrow, will that be all right?"

"Yes."

Brother Aaron stroked the food out of his beard, flicking the vestiges to the ground. "Good," he said.

Another roll of thunder broke the conversation.

"Come," the brother beckoned them. "Tonight I shall have a full house. There will be room enough."

The men followed the cloaked figure down the short slope to the hovel home. It looked to be more the burrow of a wild beast than the home of a clergy. They crawled inside, where it was lit solely by an oil lamp. A few uprights fashioned from tree trunks supported the root strewn ceiling. A crude table made from a stump sat towards the back of the aperture. A rosary lay upon it. The dirt of the earth below them was covered with a cloth turned the same color.

As they lay side by side, Jack Patrick counted the seconds between the flash and thunder and the rain falling in the empty time in between.

The cowboys awoke to the singing of boisterous hymns. There was the unfamiliar smell of smoke, something else earthier—not meat, but not nuts or tubers. They crawled from the abode to see Brother Aaron crouched over a fire frying some very small eggs.

"I went scavenging this morning," he said. He continued to hum.

"It smells good, brother," the cowboy said.

"Thank you, thank you. Thank god mostly." He scratched at the pan with a stick, scraping the egg into one of the cowboy's mess kits. "Here."

The three men ate as they had the night before.

Brother Aaron looked up at the clouded sky and said there would be no avoiding the rain.

Matt asked if they should wait.

"It will be a gentle rain."

The men finished eating and left. Brother Aaron went deep into the woods to retrieve a mule. He draped purple blankets over the mule's back as the rain began to fall. It fell steadily as little cold droplets. The cowboy told his companion to check his guns. They did so, pulled their hats down to just above their brows. The brother sang so it was infectious. As the trio wound their way through the soft wood of christmas pines spattered with drops of rain, they sang hymns.

Brother Aaron sermonized as he rode, the mule trundling underneath him, his hand waving about in the air. The top of his head glistened in the fallen rain. He preached about the first inhabitants of the planet—a man, a woman formed straight from god.

"They were given all of creation," the brother said.
"They were given reign over the whole world."

When the cowboy asked what happened, the holy man only replied it was all lost in sinfulness. No such place existed anymore, for he had searched himself. "This is as near as I can get." He gestured to the land surrounding them.

When they stopped at night, he prayed over them, their holy pilgrimage, for a just outcome for them all. The prayers ended with more gesticulation. For a moment, he kept his eyes closed. Then he opened them, looked at the men. He asked the cowboys what would become of the man they were after once he was caught.

"I suppose that would be out of our hands," Jack Patrick said.

"Yes, of course," the holy man replied. "Why do you seek this man?"

"He is a killer."

"Of who?"

"Our mother."

"Oh, I see," the brother said. "It's your mother, so naturally the man deserves whatever you will deliver unto him."

"You're not being honest with us, are you?" Matt asked.

Brother Aaron's eyebrows raised. "What do you mean?"

"You don't mean what you're saying."

"No," Brother Aaron conceded. "I do not. Your mother could very well have deserved what she received, harsh as that may seem. There is no way to know for certain. This other man, the one you are hunting down, you will not be the ones to kill him."

"Not our job," Jack Patrick said.

The clergyman sighed. "Whatever hell you bring down on this man is going to be worse than death. Life with other people usually is."

iii.

Farther south their suppers became drier things. Juice from the flesh of fruit or eggs with runny yolks, gave way to stale bread. The men ate in silence after the mumbled blessing. Brother Aaron scavenged for pine nuts. When he found a handful, he roasted them on a modest fire. His cowboy companions ate with him, their jaws loosening for story telling. Jack Patrick repeated stories he heard told to him in his youth. Matt did not tell stories. Brother

Aaron's stories were tales of god's people escaping cruel kings of sunken cities, of wives turned to salt. He recounted the days after the collapse of a great tower, the men speaking in tongues scattered across the earth, forced to wander. After the fire coals tarnished black to gray, the smoke of roasted pine nuts gone, the men fell silent again.

"You are not a priest?" Matt asked as they crossed from the conifer woods to the rocky place filled with scrub oak.

"No," Brother Aaron said. "I am a friar."

"How is that different than a priest?" Jack Patrick asked.

"I live out here among god's greatest creations. While most men see great beauty in a naked woman or in the monstrosities of churchly construction, mine eyes find beauty in the water, the soil, in all that grows."

The tonsure of Brother Aaron's head reflected the sun's epicenter causing Matt to squint as he looked at him. This mistaken look of incredulity fueled the man's sermons.

"I thought priests were to serve the people."

"Yes," the man of the cloth said. "I am no priest. I am only a brother, a friar, a hermit, a lover of all of god's creations."

"Yes, but Mister Milton told us you are a priest."

"To a mormon, a nun is a priest. They see catholics as some universal thing. I suppose I cannot be offended by such misconceptions."

The three sang hymns in flight of the day, heading ever south and east. Brother Aaron sang so his voice carried over the scrub. He sang hymns with rotating choruses so Jack Patrick could join in after hearing it a couple of times. When his voice grew hoarse he took out a bottle of what he called the sacramental whiskey. The bottle was passed between the men until they were ready to sing again.

Their path veered to the east, so the sun beat down upon their backs in bestial heat. The cowboys' shadows cast long, misshapen in front of them. The earth, kneaded with the fingered roots of skeleton conifers, baked into a crust bleached by the sun. Mighty trees were far between, then became nothing. A mass of rock swelled up before them. They camped in its shadow laying a deeper black upon the night. The men conversed by firelight, the bottle of whiskey

changing hands. A pile of game bones lay next to the stones at the brim of the fire.

"All right, brother," Matt asked. "Why are you not a priest?"

"I am not ordained as one."

"Is that all?"

"Well, I cannot administer the sacraments."

"The bread?"

"Yes, the bread, marriage, confession."

"No confession?"

"You can confess, but it is not a sacrament."

"What makes it a sacrament?"

"A priest."

"If I confess to you is it... is it official?"

"With who?"

"God, I suppose."

"Yes." Brother Aaron opened his mouth to say something, then stopped.

"That's it then?" Matt asked. "Just say what you did and everything's fine with god?"

"You would have to do some penance."

"I would have to pay you."

"No," the friar laughed. "You have been around the mormons too long. I would give you some prayers, or tell you what you have to do in order to be forgiven."

"By god?"

"Yes."

"And you would tell me for him then?"

"That is right, my brother."

"What if I do not mean it?"

"What if you said your prayers, did your work, never meaning any of it?"

"Yes."

"True atonement needs a penitent heart."

Matt leaned in close over the fire. His face, the divots and scars, marks of age, marks of life, showed deep and shadowed. "Atonement?"

"Yes, to make amends with god."

"He knows my heart then?"

"That is what they say."

"Not you?"

The friar stroked his beard. "No."

The fire crackled some. The flames reduced down into coals. The canopy of night collapsed upon the trio. An unmeasured amount of time passed when everything became

cloaked in darkness. When the man robed in sackcloth appeared only as another shadowed figure did he speak again.

"I believe god is not as connected with this world as I am. To him most of us are damned. The brother cleared his throat and spoke more slowly. If we are penitent, then we spend our lives seeking salvation, seeking his forgiveness. Too often has he heard the dying man's begging for clemency. When does he know we have a genuine heart you ask me. It is not when he say forgive me my sins, o lord, forgive me my sins--the sins of my youth, the sins of my age, the sins of my soul, the sins of my body, my idle sins, my serious voluntary sins, the sins I know, the sins I do not know, the sins I have concealed for so long, which are now hidden from my memory. No. Some people will tell you he provides tests to see if you will do the right thing. They call themselves skeptics. I am beyond skeptical. I am not that hopeful. A truly remorseful man will purposely afflict himself with what the god everyone believes is too kind would never inflict."

"Killing yourself is all right then?"

"No, that is too easy. If a sin is great enough to die for, the deliverers of true atonement will come as you let

them. Forgiveness is granted in death. Death is the ultimate absolution."

"Administered by man?"

"Could be."

The friar's voice traversed on the smoke of the deadened fire, invisible inside the night.

"When we find the man we are looking for," Jack Patrick asked. "Are we doing god's work?"

"Yes."

Then Matt spoke. "Then who delivers us?"

The night was too dark and the friar's answer was unspoken.

iv.

Heat radiating off the ground woke the men. The spell of night had worn off, as memories of dreams sometimes do upon awakening. They packed in silence. The logs of the fire were kicked into ash. They rode in silence and there was no scurrying of wildlife. There were no clouds. They sang of nothing and did not speak. No sounds came from the men, save the chalked scrapes of hoof on rock. As they passed through a crevasse cut by a long dried-up river, a wagon with a man came into view.

The wagon was pulled by a pair of donkeys. The man stood next to the animals, whipping them, damning them using god's name. When they did move—only a foot or two—he praised them in the same name.

"What should we do?" Jack Patrick asked as he looked down upon the man from the ridge's vantage point.

"There is nothing we can do," the friar replied.

"He has a sick woman in the back of the wagon," Matt said.

A silent agreement was made upon the observation of the sickened woman. The three men took the switchback down to the wagon. The man with the donkeys looked to the man in cloth.

"What are you?" he asked.

"A priest," he said. He dismounted. When he walked, he limped, saying it was the dryness of the land aggravating an old injury. The cowboys exchanged looks.

"Forgive my language, father. My beasts will not move."

"Of course. Is this your wife?"

"Yes. She is sick."

"Dying?"

The man swatted the hindquarters of the closest donkey, nodded and answered yes.

The priest climbed into the back of the wagon. He knelt above the withered woman's body. He whispered low and touched his forehead, his gut, then his two shoulders.

"I call upon the greatest archangel Raphael, master of the air, to open way for this to be done."

Nowhere was there sound in the air of the sky. All remained unmoved.

The priest's voice fell into mutters again. The man had stopped trying to rouse his donkeys. He sat now upon a rock, hand stretched up to the bridal bit. His other hand covered his eyes. The priest asked her if she had any sins to confess. When she beckoned him close, he leaned in to listen. He sat up, holding out his hand. The old woman gave him a coin. He asked her of another, graver sin. The silence was broken by her calling the friar by name, telling him to go. The cowboys looked to see the spire of the old woman's arm, her finger pointed into the priest's face, then wilt. Beads of sweat fell down, dripping off the holy man's nose as false tears. He wiped his forehead, flicking the perspiration on the body below. He went to the man still sitting on the ground.

"I was not able to finish," he told the husband. With his hand still shielding his eyes, the man nodded. Tears, if there were any, evaporated before they fell to the earth.

The cowboys and their guide rode up the switchback they had descended, leaving the man widowed and alone.

The men rode the trail until it fell into a flat-bottomed gulch. The mountains too had flattened some.

"What are you?" Jack Patrick asked of the man of cloth.

"I am god's servant."

"Judah," the other one called.

The priest laughed to himself.

The sun-high, unshrouded, completely naked-flagellated the men with its pitiless rays. The scrubs of the cacti, the sand-burrowing snakes of this place were salt and dust. They continued on to where the peaks of the mountains crumbled flat, parallel to the horizon, the ashen red tops still aglow with the last embers of life. The noon sun rubbed at the peaks' blackened roots. The trinity trod to where the flats ragged grasses broke with slotted canyons, cut with arroyos and bowled over with dust. The priest's

mule brayed low and shook the ropes hanging about its neck. The men's saddles creaked. And the hooves of the horses plodded on the naked earth.

"Where are you taking us?" Matt asked.

Jack Patrick's horse snorted. There was no breeze in this place and the man of the cloth, clad in layman's black, only smiled dark.

The land lay before them sepulchral and littered with reckoned trees and the rocks that once composed the floor of a now-desiccated ocean, beaten by the sun-drenched rays. Alien rocks were dusted in the cremated remains of the desert.

"To where are you taking us?" Matt asked a second time.

The priest laughed in the bowels of his throat, and it resounded among the loaves of rock.

"My god," the companion said, and it too echoed in the desert place that lay ahead of them.

Part II.

I.

i.

The two cowboys, as broken as their horses were tamed, rode into the town corralled between the lines of buildings. The sickly beasts staggered about, hooves worn down to the coffin bone, beneath the frog. Their manes like tufts of straw. The ribs of the horses defined through the thin fur and lack of fat. The figures riding upon them ragged bodies, slackened, with only the last few threads of life holding them together.

The people in the streets of Aurora watched from a distance. They spied the strangers as they passed the church that lay out by itself from the town. The cowboys' paths diverged. The one horse, more sickly than the other, trundled to a trough of water. The other staggered on, coming to a stop outside the sheriff's office. The cowboy slumped forward and slid from his saddle to the ground. When he fell, it was a muted thump only recognized by the disturbance of the dirt. He breathed still. The horse collapsed with great sound and it did not breathe still.

That night the cowboys slept in the houses of strangers. One dreamed of trodding, trodding across a lake and not being able to drink. He followed a pair of feet. He could not see who the feet belonged to—the weight about his neck was too great. He could not lift his head. The feet were sandaled. The sandals themselves were broken. Blood stained the feet and dirt hung to the coagulated patches.

The other cowboy had no visions. He slept in a great and endless black. When he awoke, he would say amen.

Jack Patrick and Matt recovered in time. They ate bread and drank the drinks of warmth given to them. The one's horse was nursed for a time. It was given a stable and fed green hay. After a while the animal doctor gave up hope and ordered the animal be shot. He stated it was the only humane thing to do. A part of each man was destroyed in the time they had not been conscious, leaving a void.

They walked, knees unbending, through the town. The one opened his mouth to speak, but found that breathing had become taxing enough. There was something raw inside of them now, something reserved for the animals of antediluvian times. They continued on, driven by instinct,

in search of something to either fill or rebuild the void.
And the void growled in them like a hunger.

They leaned on a hitching rail outside a shop on the main drag—one facing the street, the other with his back to the town.

"What do we do?" Jack Patrick asked.

His brother said they'd do what they'd come here to do.

"Are we ready?" he asked. "I mean with everything that happened out there in—"

"We're readier than the man we're hunting," Matt said. Then he walked, as if suddenly rejuvenated toward the sheriff's office.

The sheriff of Aurora was a lean man, a Polish type displaced from his homeland, as rumor had it. When Jack Patrick and Matt entered, he stood.

"Gentlemen," he said. He stood and made a grandiose gesture for them to be seated. The men stood silently.

The sheriff talked. "We have thought you two must be either men from outside the law or"—and he paused, making a mock frown and wagging his hand back and forth—"lawmen of

sorts. After you stayed past your waking, I concluded you must be men looking for the law."

"Yes," Jack Patrick said.

"You both have obviously traveled some great distance and at some peril. This must be a personal vendetta. Please sit."

The cowboys did as they were told and sat opposite from the sheriff.

"It is not a vendetta," Matt said.

"How is that?"

"It is justice."

"Oh."

Jack Patrick leaned forward in his chair. "Forgive us," he said. He extended his hand, rising slightly from his chair and over the desk. "I am Jack Patrick Martin."

"Yes," the sheriff said. "I am Lex Talionis."

"This here is my brother, Matt. Our mother was murdered."

"Oh. I am sorry. ...This was recent?"

"No, we were very young then."

The sheriff picked at one of his nostrils with his thumbnail. He inspected the underside of his fingernail. "I need a bounty paper."

Jack Patrick opened the satchel at his side and withdrew a brittle, yellowed paper. He handed it to the sheriff.

"Yes," the sheriff said as he studied it. "Not a lot to come from Utah for. What makes you think this man is still out here and alive?"

"We have it from a whore that the man stopped in Layton after going bust in California. He was heading for new fortune in Aurora. When he got here, he picked up another bounty for the same thing. Only the bounty was so low no one wanted to go after it. He lives around here still."

Lex again made a mock frown and bobbed his head from side to side. "I was not sheriff here then. I am fairly new. I do have old bounty papers if you wish to go through them. There is no such thing as expired justice as far as I am concerned."

ii.

From Aurora, telegrams concerning the killer of the boys' mother were sent out. At all hours of the day, across midland Nebraska, little wires clicked messages from a nameless entity. The receivers of the messages deciphered

the clicks into letters, into words. They searched the town's archives as they had been asked, looking for unfulfilled bounties. The replies came back to Aurora quickly, like lightning arcing from one town to the next—only invisible, and the echoes of thunder reduced to a meek chattering.

When Sheriff Talionis found the boys to tell them where there bounty was, they were cleaning their guns in their room at the inn.

"I have, Lex paused, frowning, a confirmation."

"That so?"

The other cowboy stopped cleaning his rifle and looked to the sheriff.

"Are we sure it's him?"

"It is. I checked with another source."

"Where's he at? Can we go get him?"

Lex looked for a place to sit as the cowboys were seated on their beds, but there was no place to be found, nor was one offered.

"You can go after him, sure." Lex folded his arms then unfolded them, putting his hands into his pockets. "He's not far from here. Lives outside the boundaries of any towns—a homesteader they call them."

Matt grunted; Jack Patrick snapped the barrel of the rifle shut.

"You boys understand he lives outside my jurisdiction; I can't do much except offer you my blessing."

"We'll need horses."

"If you bring him back alive, he will have to face justice, gentlemen—could end up hanging."

The men continued to assemble their gear in silence.

The cowboys rode on their borrowed horses, north to where Lex told them their bounty may be. Like most of the time they had ridden, they were alone. They did not talk. Their horses trotted lightly through the grasses so their tromping became a nearly inaudible thrushing.

There came a slight incline, almost imperceptible to the men, but not to their horses. The wind weakened here and carried the scent of burning wood. Matt smelled this too and prepared his pistol.

The men perched at the top of the slope, at the crest of the steeper downhill. A homestead with a wisp of grey smoke sat below.

"This it?"

"Yeah, I think so."

And the men descended on the house. They circled around to the front door. Jack Patrick unsheathed his rifle. Matt thumbed back the hammers of his pistols. They slid from their saddles and crept to the covered porch, stopping outside the front door.

They listened for a moment and only the distant sea song and the crackle of the fireplace blaze from within filled their ears.

"All right?" Matt asked.

"You ready?" Jack Patrick asked.

Matt nodded and Jack Patrick nodded back.

"Let's get him."

"All right."

The wind died for a moment and they breached the door.

The homestead was indeed the home of the cowboys' bounty. It was a comfortable place, a humble one-room cabin. Fresh logs lay on the fire. A stew was ready to boil. At the table there was a pistol dismantled, ready for cleaning. And hanging from the rafters towards the rear of the house, was the corpse of the man.

Matt stood the toppled chair beneath the man's feet upright again. He, himself, stood upon it and took out his

pocketknife. He cut the rope. The weight of the body on the cord caused the rope to snap as soon as the blade's edge touched it. The body fell to the floor.

"Do you think he heard us coming?" Jack Patrick asked his companion.

"I don't know," his companion replied. He took out his pistol. "But I did not hear him beg for mercy."

After the homestead had burnt to the ground and the ashes blew cold in the wind, the cowboys left. The body dragged behind Matt's horse. They spoke little and when they came back into Aurora, Jack Patrick stopped at the church trough to water his horse. Matt rode on, dragging the corpse. The people of the street watched as he came to hitch his horse in front of the sheriff's office. Lex Talionis came to the rail.

"You got your man, I see."

Matt dismounted and cut the rope from his saddle. "He was dead when we found him. Hung himself up."

"So you dragged him here—hanged him twice. Can't say that I can condone that—women in the streets you know. Him being naked and dead now."

"Clothes dragged right off of him."

"At least you covered his head with that sack. How about taking that off so I can get a look at him?"

Matt untied the noose from the corpse's neck and slipped the bag off. The eyes were open and bloodshot. The tongue was swollen, black.

Lex nodded with his lips pursed. "Not very pretty. We'll see what the undertaker can do to make him presentable. ...Let me get your bounty."

When the sheriff turned his back Matt said no. He pulled out the dead man's pistol, now assembled and operational, and fired it three times. Each of the bullets broke the skin on the corpse's face.

"There won't be an open casket for him."

Lex turned nonchalantly and looked down at the now slopped and broken face of the dead man. He nodded without commendation or damnation. "There were two bounties for him I believe, a total of thirty dollars."

The men were paid in silver coins weighed out on a balance scale, a mass of iron forged into a smooth cylinder countered the payment until both hung suspended in air.

"I have other work you can do," the sheriff said. He removed the coins from the scale, letting the other side fall unfettered to the desktop.

II.

i.

Most of the bounty missions Matt accepted, Jack Patrick chose to stay back. When he did go, he stood as a sentinel over his brother while Matt did the more dangerous of the deeds. A silent witness to the happenings of the plains and guardian to his brother, Jack Patrick never fired his rifle. He simply watched from the distance with the power to fire a burst of justice into the scene. He could change the destiny of men, his presence like lightning striking fire to a scrag tree.

But he never did. Shots resounded inside of a house just outside of Bradshaw. The rapport was that of Matt's pistols and his brother did not stir. The screams, the beggings for mercy were not his brother's and he pretended not to hear. Nor did Jack Patrick twitch when Matt killed three men in the streets of McCool's Junction. Like his mother's killer, these men did not need him to interfere with the path justice routed through their lives.

And though Matt was the sole bringer of bounties and the only one to deliver the bodies of the dead, and the

soon to be judged, to Sheriff Talionis, the bounty rewards were evenly split between the brothers.

The brothers crossed the Platte River; they were hunting a father and son running westward. Word had it the fugitives were passing through, stopping at the smaller towns in an effort to avoid the larger cities. Grand Island was the only major crossroads north of the Platte, so the brothers rode to Chapman, the last stop before choosing the pass to the city or the open country.

"This is what we're doing from now on?" Jack Patrick asked.

"What?"

"Bounties."

"Like these two, the father and son?"

"Yeah, like them. We spending the rest of our days like this?"

To their right, the Platte flowed along still as font water, barely rippled so it appeared as a wrinkled sheet of sheen. The plains to their left also remained unmoved.

"No," Matt finally said. "We'll eventually get a move on."

"Back home? ...Back to the island, I mean."

"Can't."

Jack Patrick looked out to the grasses, past the profile of his brother.

"We could take a different way back."

Matt nodded. He spit.

"Did I tell you what this father and son are wanted for?"

Everything remained hushed; even the steeds trundled on without noise.

"The son, he did some shady dealings back east. Don't understand it all myself. Something about being a fraud. When he gets found out, he shoots his boss."

On the horizon the buildings of a town cropped up as unnatural growths—small blocks of shadows. Jack Patrick nodded. "Chapman," he said.

Matt took his pistols from his holsters and examined the muzzles, checked the chambers. He continued on with the story. "The son is pretty much a dead man walking until his father shows up, a respectable man. Well, he shoots a constable and they go on the run together. They've been robbing their way west since."

"Horses need a break," Jack Patrick said. He stroked the fur on his horse's neck.

Matt nodded in agreement. "We can't go back to the island, Jack Patrick."

"I can take the horses to get watered," his brother said. "You ask around about this father and his son."

The horse lapped the water from the troughs while Jack Patrick watched. He lazily held the beasts by their bits, then by the loose hanging reins, and soon, by nothing at all.

Matt sauntered over. He had his long coat drawn shut to conceal his pistols.

"Anything?" Jack Patrick asked.

"They're here."

"Whereabouts?"

"They bought some fresh horses at the livery yesterday. Got a room at the inn over there."

Matt's eyes darted to the house with a sign welcoming boarders—both long and short term—to the McGuffy Family Inn.

"They plannin' on leavin' today?"

"Yeah. Right after the blacksmith shoes the horses up."

Jack Patrick reached to the dangling strap of leather about the horse's neck and tugged. The horse stopped drinking. "New rides, new horseshoes, that's a lot of money. Any big robberies around here recently?"

Matt laughed and pulled at the bit of his horse; it too stopped drinking. "None that I know of. Lex could probably find something though—use the wire and contact other towns."

The two men stood, looking at each other's boots. Chapman was a peaceful town with sparse, barren streets between buildings. The occasional passer-by paid no attention to the strangers.

"Got a plan?"

"Thinking of one."

"All right."

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "Don't go lookin' conspicuous now, but the room they're in is over the porch there. See if you can take a peek."

Jack Patrick likewise shifted his weight from one leg to the other; he stroked his horse's side and peered one eye from under the brim of his hat, then lowered his head again. He looked to the ground.

"Got it. They got the curtains shut."

"Yeah, probably watchin' us through the fabric—looks to be pretty lacey."

"Suspicious of strangers. Especially in a town like this. Only thing for them to do is sit and watch."

"Makes for a pretty touchy set up. They killed a couple of bounty men outside Omaha a few weeks ago, in a little town called Wahoo."

"Would've liked to have known this before setting out."

"I know it; that's why I didn't tell you."

"What's the plan?"

"I'm gonna need you to stay here," Matt said.

"Wait—"

"Listen. They've already seen you're packin' a rifle. You'd be best to not move."

He looked to his saddlebag, the long leather sheath of his rifle sticking up like a flag.

"All right. Remember, if I get killed, you don't get any money out of it."

"True," Matt said. "I also won't have to split anything with you."

"What're you gonna do?"

"Me? I'm gonna get a haircut and a shave."

Jack Patrick looked up at his brother, into his eyes. He was smiling.

"I'm gonna cut through the barber shop, out the back door," he said. "I'll take the long way round, come up behind the inn."

"They'll be watchin' me."

"Right. But just to make certain they are, you're gonna pull out your rifle and draw a bead on their window. Give it a ten count when you see me go into McGuffy's. And stay behind your horse."

"And you're..."

"Going in through the door. Two of them, two of my guns. "

Matt tipped his hat, pulled his jacket tighter and began walking to the barber shop.

There was time to fill. Jack Patrick looked up to the sun, squinting. His horse began to drink again. He propped one foot up on the edge of the trough. In an effort to appear nonchalant, he bent down to pick at the dirt wedged between the outsole and the welting of his boot. As soon as he stooped down, he realized his mistake; he had obscured himself from the sight of the men watching in the window by hiding behind his horse. Not wanting to arouse further

suspicion by standing up too quick, he leant forward, exposing his head and shoulders. He splashed trough water on his face. Then he stood up slowly. A woman in a long dress walked by and he tipped his hat to her, saying ma'am. He turned absent-mindedly to tighten the straps about his saddle. As he performed the function—cinching the wide belts of leather through the hasps—his skin began to burn. He put himself dangerously close to the rifle. It was not time for him to draw the gun yet. Out of his periphery, the curtains in the window of the inn shifted benignly. Jack Patrick coughed a fake cough and slapped his chest. He tottered in a circle, and coming to a rest, hand on the horse's hindquarters, pretending his breathing was taxed by the spell. Once he stopped heaving his chest, he walked to the trough and took a cupped handful of water. A fleeting figure dashed from behind a shed to behind the inn. Jack Patrick did not pretend to drink the trough water, for his thirst was not feigned. Squinting back up at the sun; it beat down steady, a-rhythmically, trumpets of rays blaring out in the vast blue nothing. A few seconds passed, and Jack Patrick knew it was time. He turned to his horse. And in one swift and swooping motion he unsheathed the rifle, leveling it across his arm and the saddle of the horse. He

drew a bead down the length of the barrel and there was thunderous salvo. The horse bucked, whinnied and knocked Jack Patrick to the ground. Dust kicked up. Somewhere beyond, confined to the inn, were more shots. The concussive blast ruptured a second time. It was followed by a series of hard, flat packs. As Jack Patrick rose to his feet, he saw blood. Two more shots unfamiliar to him resounded from the inn. With the glass of the window pane now shattered, the curtains flapped in the wind. And he ran. His stride was abnormal as the rifle was much more cumbersome on foot than on horseback. The front screen door of the inn was open, the staircase leading to the rooms upstairs just inside.

He ran to the hallway upstairs.

"Hands!" he yelled. A portly man with a dark beard cut flat across the bottom was at the far end of the hallway.

"I'm a boarder," he said, putting his hands in the air. The doors on either side of the hallway were open. From inside one of the open rooms Matt told someone to do it. There was a staccato pop and a thud. Matt emerged from the doorway.

"Get out of here," he said to the bearded man and the man bolted himself into his room.

The brothers stood between the open doorways, shards of wood on the floor, the air smelling of sulphur, slightly hazy.

"Both of them?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Yeah. The son was staying in the room across the hall. Blew the door right off its hinges when I came into his father's room here."

With the heel of his boot, Jack Patrick kicked at the scrapped pieces of wood. Sounds of the town awakening came in through the broken window pane. People were talking. A horse neighed.

"They got off a few shots."

"I didn't get hit."

"I can see that."

"Hit the father while he was shooting at you."

Jack Patrick stepped forward so he could study the scene. The man's body lay rumped on the floor, without much blood, his carbine next to him. Another body sprawled out closer to the threshold. There was much more blood, no gun.

"The last shot—"

"Him," Matt motioned to the second corpse.

"Yeah. What happened?"

"Got shot."

"I heard you tell him to just do it."

Matt inspected his guns, rotating the chambers, replacing the spent shells with newer ones. "I lent him my pistol. I told him to pretend he was suckling on the barrel."

"You shot an unarmed boy?"

"He shot himself."

"At gunpoint."

The two looked at each other hard for a long while.

"I'm in the business of delivering bodies, not saving them," Matt said.

He walked past his brother, back down the stairs, out though the screen door, into the streets basking in the sun. Jack Patrick paused only for a moment before following.

A few of the Chapman residents watched the cowboys. A small gathering of men aggregated about the spot where Jack Patrick had been told to stay. The horse lay on the dirt of the street, neighing weakly. The beast bucked its hooves, dragging them sideways through the air, scratching long lines in the dust.

"You left your horse to die," an old timer said.

"Ain't right," another said.

They looked to Jack Patrick, to his rifle. But he stood inert and dumb to them. The horse's wild eye, glassy and black, cast up at the expanse above. He watched it grow foggy after the two flat, hard packs of his brother's pistols brought silence amongst them all. While all the spectators looked to the dead horse with pity, Jack Patrick looked to his brother—his father's son, the one with whom he shared a womb—and saw a smirk, crook the edge of his mouth.

ii.

Most of Jack Patrick's time after Chapman was spent at the local pub. His brother rode out on bounty missions on his own. And while Matt hunted down the wanted outlaws, Jack Patrick drank whiskeys brewed locally and stored briefly in used barrels and poured stiff and thick with soot. Word came back by way of gossip and telegram, stating Matt killed a couple of bank robbers in Friend, found a grifter in Broken Bow. Neither of the incidents were product of Sheriff Talionis's intervention.

"You're not out with your brother," the bartender said.

"Ain't ridin' to hunt bounties," Jack Patrick said.

"He does the work," the bartender said. Then, taking a bottle and swirling the liquid inside, he said. "But you got the money to drink."

Whiskey—this one browner than the previous ones—poured into the glass in little glugs.

"I do my end."

"You were sitting right here when we got word Matt found the son-of-a-bitch who raped and killed that preacher's wife in St. Paul."

"Yeah, that's right." He drank. "Only bounty I ever cared about is already dead."

Another patron, an old schooner of a man, came to the counter. "You say you're the half of the bounty brothers that's been a-stayin' here?"

The man sat in one of the stools and the bartender took the empty glass set at the place off the counter. "We were talkin' here, old timer."

But the old man went on anyway. "I got a tip for ya'll. 'Bout an older fella, like me. A rustler."

"You're talkin' with the wrong brother," the bartender said.

"No. Jack Patrick held up his hand. Go on. ...Cattle rustler? Horses?"

"No." The old man eyed his companion's beverage and Jack Patrick nodded for the bartender to fill a glass. Little glugs of hardwood whiskey filled his glass and the drink puckered the man's lips when he drank it. He began talking again, in a huskier, lower tone. "Rustles mining plots. Sellin' deeds that ain't his. Got an old bounty on his head. Worth a lot."

"Round here?"

The man nodded. "Outside of Western."

"West of where?"

"Western."

"Of here?"

"Damn it," the bartender said. "The town is called Western."

"...And it's west of here?"

"South."

"South-east actually."

Rooting in the pockets of his vest and pants, Jack Patrick looked for a coin to pay for the drinks. Upon finding one, he instructed the bartender to leave the

bottle of whiskey and find another patron to converse with; he was busy with a customer himself.

After the mining plot rustler was tracked down, shot and brought to Aurora, men with vendettas and tips, clues to crimes came to Jack Patrick. They bought him drinks and spoke in hushed voices, describing propositions.

"A horse thief?"

The man finished his drink in a single swig. "Yes sir."

"All the way out in North Platte?"

"That's right."

"Too far."

"—I was thinking—"

"It's too far."

And the next man would sidle up to the bar, holding up two fingers for the bartender. Two more glasses of ambered liquid were set before the men.

"My name's Preston—"

"Don't need a name."

"I heard you got a brother who's a gun for hire."

"He's a bounty hunter."

"Right. I heard you were the one to talk to."

Reaching for his drink, Jack Patrick stopped, his fingers resting on the side of the glass, his arm leaden.
"Yeah, I'm the one."

The man drank his own drink down and gestured to the bartender for another one.

"It's my wife."

Jack Patrick did not move; he stared at his drink.

"She ran off with a landowner," the man said. "Sells off his properties, y'know."

"She ain't got a bounty on her?"

"No."

"Then we can't help."

"But she's a murderer too."

"How's that?"

"She was pregnant when she left; we were expecting the baby here in a few months. She went to a doctor in Hastings. Had the baby killed inside of her."

"You know this for a fact?"

The man's fingers traced the rim of the empty glass.
"I had her followed."

"Followed and not killed."

"I wanted to know what was going on."

"And now you want her killed."

"Keep your voice down."

"Why can't you do it?"

"Because I'm a deputy," the young man said.

"And killin' is against the law."

"But you're not bound—"

"Go. We can't help you."

Lamplight staid back the rays of night that came with the onset of dusk, after the fury of sunset. The land surrounding Aurora lay unlit. In his room, Jack Patrick undressed, hanging his hat on a hook and placing his boots by his bed. Footsteps came down the hall and stopped at the door. The single beam of light became dashed with the shadows of the stranger's feet. The door opened.

"Jack Patrick," he said.

Jack Patrick did not look at his brother.

"Weren't expectin' you back quite yet."

"I rode straight through."

"Yeah."

Matt walked over to the dresser between their beds and placed a stack of paper money on it. He placed a few coins on top.

"Fellas surrendered; cried when I found them."

"Huh."

"Can't do anything with men like that."

He unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it on his bed, unfastened his pants and sat down to take them off. Coins fell out of the pockets and rolled across the floor.

"You followed the lead I gave you?"

"Right to where the geezer was at."

"...Good."

Matt went to the basin and splashed some water on his face.

"Any new leads?"

Jack Patrick lay down, stared at the ceiling, then rolled to his side to look out the window. He concentrated on the reflection the lamp cast on the glass, tried to stare through it and out into the mirage of night. Closing his eyes, he listened to Matt disassemble his pistols, turn the revolver and check the hammer, squeeze the trigger and put them back together.

"A horse thief," he said. "Out in North Platte."

"Too far to ride for a horse thief."

"I know it."

The bed across the room creaked and settled and Jack Patrick knew his brother had lain down for slumber.

"Maybe we should get on, go look somewhere else."

"Another fella wants his wife killed."

"I only go after wanted men."

"Says she's a murderer. Killed their unborn baby; got the baby killed by a crooked doctor. Settled down with her lover."

"Whereabouts?"

"Hastings—a place just outside of Hastings."

Jack Patrick opened his eyes and extinguished the lamp so all was dark.

"Think I might go after the MacKowski Brothers," Matt said.

"Yeah?"

"They're down around Hastings last I heard."

"Six of them."

"I'll get them to ride in here and give themselves up."

"They'll hang."

"I'll talk with Lex in the morning before I set out."

"...That fella with the wife, he got a name?"

In the darkness, Jack Patrick's eyes adjusted and he saw the stars appear.

"Deputy Preston."

iii.

As had become his custom, Jack Patrick sat at the pub, the sole counsel of vengeful men. He imbibed lacquerous offerings and listened to their reasonings before telling them to go. Some protested, saying it was his duty to act on their words. He told them to go quietly and he'd watch over them, see what he could do. The patrons vacated the bar stool and a new mendicant for justice sat down. Jack Patrick tried not to look at their faces.

"Two whiskeys," a man in a bowler cap said as he sat down next to the cowboy. The drinks were placed in front of the man and he slid one over to Jack Patrick.

"You're not from out this way, are you cowboy? You're not a flat-lander."

"That's right."

"Then you may not know where most of the crime happens."

"I have an idea."

"It's in the banks."

Jack Patrick dipped his finger in the whiskey and suckled on the bead dangling from the end. The whiskey was flavored with something sweet.

"Like that whiskey?"

"Yes," Jack Patrick said.

"Flavored with honey. Made it myself."

Jack Patrick looked at the man. Black-suited and bearded, he stuck out his hand.

"Name's Vulmer."

But Jack Patrick did not shake his hand.

"You already know who I am."

"Yes."

"And you're the brewmiester."

"Yes."

"You're a rich man, flavoring whiskey with honey."

The man smiled. "I own a lot of land, yes."

"And about the banks?"

Mr. Vulmer took his short glass of liquor down in one drink.

"The banks," he said, "are corrupt. They got men working in there, managers who steal land deeds, forge documents."

"Men without bounties."

"Yes."

"Can't go after them then."

"No, I'm not asking for that. There's other men who take care of these banks."

"Robbers?"

"Yes. Sometimes those robbers are the same as you and your brother."

"Robbers don't got a contract to rob, like Matt and me got bounty papers."

"You're hired help, like the MacKowski gang."

Jack Patrick nodded, his eyes connecting with Mr. Vulmer's. He sipped on the drink just enough to taste the honey.

"You know where Matt's headin' then?"

"Yes."

"And the MacKowski gang is yours."

"That's right; they keep the banks away from my land."

The men stared at one another. Jack Patrick sipped his drink again.

"Gentlemen," another voice said. And the men turned to see Sheriff Talionis standing behind them.

"I was set to leave, Sheriff," Vulmer said. He tipped his hat and flipped a coin onto the bar. He winked at Jack Patrick. Lex did not take the man's seat.

"Come along," he said and put his hand on the cowboy's shoulder. "Think we should talk down at the office."

The tongue of flame threw strange exaggerated shadows across the room. Lex leaned against the desk. Though it was late, he still worked, still wore the mantle of a lawman and he invited Jack Patrick in when he knocked on his door.

"Sit, sit," he said. He pulled out a chair for Jack Patrick.

A screen of shadows hid Jack Patrick's face, but his voice remained clear.

"Vulmer knows about Matt's bounty plans."

"Yes."

"Did you tell him?"

Lex scratched at one of his sideburns. "Vulmer knows more than he should. But I know more than him."

Jack Patrick remained unmoved in the shadows.

"Your brother was planning on staying at an inn just north of Hastings tonight. He's going to meet the sheriff in the morning. No one knows who he is, except us."

"And Vulmer."

Lex bobbed his head from side to side. "My town's seen a couple of hangings, never six in the same day. My gallows only has one noose."

"You think Matt should come back?"

"The inn he chose to hide away in is equipped with a telegraph."

Jack Patrick bowed his head. "It shouldn't go like this."

"Like what?"

"We left wanting justice."

"And you got it. The man who killed your mother is dead." Lex shrugged. "Go on back to your origin."

Jack Patrick shook his head, muttering how Matt wouldn't have it. "We went into the desert," he said.

"The desert?"

"...Skeleton land, just bones and rock, no soil. No trails neither. Just a broken place and he took us into it. Nowhere to hide from the sun, everything baking into dust. ...We didn't have a choice."

Lex humored the bounty man with a question. "Was someone else was there?"

Jack Patrick nodded. "I looked at the blood drying on the rocks and asked Matt about our atonement."

Lex's brow furrowed. He shuffled some papers on his desk, cleared his throat. "What do you want to do about Matt?" he asked. "You can try to save him."

The cowboy said the sheriff's name, but the lawman replied by saying he was not with the brothers in the desert. "I'm here now. What are you doing about your brother?"

"Yeah, fine," Jack Patrick said. "I'll send him a telegram."

iv.

Smoke drifted lightly from the end of the cigarette Jack Patrick had rolled. As the paper wound around the dried tobacco burned, it browned. Deputy Preston sat at the edge of the kitchen table. His kitchen hadn't been clean in some time, littered with stubs of cigarettes and grounds of coffee beans—mugs used as ash trays—dirty tin plates and scraps of bones.

"You need me to get a half dozen deputies together?" he repeated.

"At least a half dozen."

"You're askin' me 'cause the sheriff can't know."

Smoke came out of Jack Patrick's nostrils in two streams. "That's right."

"What's he—that brother of yours—plannin'?"

"...Bringin' in the MacKowski gang."

Deputy Preston stood up. He paced from the table to the doorway and back.

"Those are Vulmer's men."

"I know it."

"Vulmer's gonna have them lookin' out for your brother, lookin' out for the law."

"Yeah." Jack Patrick flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette. "I sent him a telegram. We've got ourselves a plan."

"One that includes six deputies."

"At least six...not including yourself."

"How's he gonna get all six of the MacKowski clan to get themselves in a spot where he can take 'em?"

Jack Patrick drew his last breath on the cigarette and stubbed it out on the tabletop. He leaned forward in the chair. "Matt's posin' as an outlaw. Tells them he's got the goods on a bank here in Aurora—tells them the bank's holdin' extra cash on hand for the rail company. When they walk into the bank we're waiting for them."

"You came to me because of my wife, what I asked you to do."

"Yes."

And—

"It's done. But only if you lend us the men."

"Vulmer will have us killed."

"Talionis will have you killed for hiring a man to kill your wife."

"I didn't pay anyone."

"It won't matter."

The deputy swore and scraped the toe of his boot across the floorboards.

"Damn it all to hell," he said. "I'll get you some men. You'll catch the MacKowskis. But you an' your brother are dead men walking."

The MacKowski gang rode into town not as a band of marauders brandishing firearms, but in single file, spaced evenly, following in the tracks of the one in front, the lead man—a burly sort—chugging on a cigar. Inside the bank Jack Patrick and his borrowed deputies watched the band of criminals approach.

"What're they doin'?" Deputy Preston asked.

"Watering their horses. Talking."

The deputies, mercenaries all, readied their weapons.

"Don't get fidgety now," the lookout said. "One's comin' in."

"Just one?"

"Probably give the place a look over."

The men scrambled to their teller windows, hid their guns. Jack Patrick crouched under the counter at Preston's feet.

"Act like you naturally would."

"Like a deputy?"

"A bank teller."

The door opened. The bells flapped their ringers inside. The man stepped inside. Jack Patrick could hear the man's feet padding their way across the floor, stopping on the opposite side of the counter.

"You need—you have... Can I help you sir?" Preston asked.

The man cleared his throat. "Got a transfer needs cashin'," he said.

"Well, certainly."

Then all noise stopped. Preston's feet shuffled in place. His weight shifted from one leg to the next.

"You gonna get my money?"

Preston pressed a couple of keys on the register, each chiming, but none opening the cash drawer. He laughed abruptly and immediately ceased, saying something about the new registers and how he preferred the old ones.

"The money, parder."

The cash drawer opened with a double chime.

"Looks like you got a transfer here for about—"

"Seven dollars and twenty cents."

"Right. Seven and twenty."

The deputy counted out loud, dwindling off after four.

"There's seven," he said. "And a quarter more."

"Only twenty cents more."

The deputy's fingers shuffled through the coins in the register drawer.

"Oh. ...You got change?"

"What the hell kind of bank you runnin'? Here." The man slapped a nickel on the counter. His footsteps receded to the doorway, where the door opened and slammed shut, the bells jangling their farewell. A moment of quiet pervaded the room. Jack Patrick stood up.

"You don't know how to count."

"Didn't think it'd be needed."

"Gave him 'bout ten dollars, didn't you?"

"How should I know?"

The two men stood a few inches apart, close enough to feel each other's breath.

"They's comin' this way," the deputy at the window said.

"All of 'em?" Jack Patrick asked. He did not look away from the teller deputy.

"The whole lot of 'em."

Jack Patrick broke his stare and vaulted the counter, positioning himself behind the door.

"Remember, no shooting, just business as usual 'til they all get inside. ...And that old hairy boy's mine."

Then a long bated silence. Soles of the men's boots gathered lightly, stomping on the porch outside. The door opened and the men, the outlaws, filed into the room.

"We're robbin' this here bank," the old hairy boy said, cigar clenched in his teeth.

Matt took up the rear of the gang. He swung the door shut and Jack Patrick stepped forward to bury the muzzle of his rifle into the back of old boy's head. The disguised tellers drew out their guns. One pistol of Matt's trained

on one of the brethren; his other pistol poked into the neck of the man standing next to him.

"Well, I'll done be," the old boy said.

"Shut your yawp, Lou."

"Drop your guns. Three of you'll be dead if you try anything."

The bandits began to unfasten their belts.

"Use your right hand there, Lefty."

Lefty spit and switched hands, letting his belt fall.

"Gather them up," Jack Patrick said.

Preston did as instructed and picked the guns up off the floor.

"You're a traitor and the son of a suckling whore," one of the bandits said. He spat on Matt.

"Turn around."

"Sheriff's comin'," the deputy by the window said.

"Right on time," Jack Patrick said.

The door opened and the sheriff studied the scene he walked into.

"Oh, boys," he said and shook his head.

v.

News of the hangings set for the next day spread through the town quickly. It was widely regarded that the MacKowski brothers were not the only doomed men involved. Jack Patrick and Matt stayed up late in their room cleaning their weapons.

"Folks say we're gonna get ours from Vulmer," one said.

"They sayin' that?"

"Yeah." He inspected the sight at the end of his barrel, pointed the gun at the lamp sitting on the dresser across the room, and closed one eye.

"Also said there was a four hundred dollar bounty on each man."

They continued cleaning in silence. Indeed the night in the town was quiet; only the banshee calls of low winds howled beneath the silence.

"What about Preston's wife?"

Matt shook his head.

"You kill her?"

He shook his head again and said, "Naw. Had the MacKowskis do it. Set her up. Her man too."

A draft caught the flame in their lamp and it flickered, then burned as a weakened flame—a crescent of

blood. The cowboy rolled his bullets in the palm of his hand, the chamber of the pistol open and ready for loading with the other hand.

"Them boys weren't too nice to her neither."

"That so?"

"They took their turns with her, made her mister watch. When they were done, they shot him through the eyes. She was screamin' and they cut her. The one—the one they call Runt, got on top of her again, but Lou gave him a wallop, said she's dead and it wasn't right. —Gotta do that type of stuff before the lady's dead."

Jack Patrick watched his brother load up the chamber of his pistols, his gaze fixed on the task at hand. He rubbed the metal of the gun with a rag and light oil until it sheened in the low lamplight.

"Vulmer can come after me if he wants. He ain't never ridden with what he created."

Morning came and the town gathered around the gallows. The cowboys stayed by the horse troughs, far from the epicenter of the crowd. Whispers, chattering of rumors passing between the people in the mass, hovered just above inaudibility as one long yawning murmur. Deputy Preston

positioned himself on the stage of the gallows, next to the lever for the trapdoor. The door of the jail opened and the oldest of the MacKowski gang, held by the elbow, was led by Sheriff Talionis. With his hands shackled, the chain cutting into his gut, his eyes searching the crowd and feet shuffling short scuffs across the dirt, he made his way toward the gallows. The whispers swelled, then fell in decrescendo, a silence. And Deputy Preston read the litany of crimes for the old boy. As the transgressions were read Sheriff Talionis fitted the noose around his neck, pulling the prisoner's beard out from under the rope. He leaned in close to the criminal and said a couple of words. He nodded and walked off the stage.

"What do you suppose he said?" Jack Patrick asked.

Matt shrugged. Somewhere a distant voice said Lou MacKowski was sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. There was a clatter, and again, through whispers—though louder—messages transmitted through the crowd.

The sheriff pushed his way through the people, toward the cowboy brothers. A deputy retrieved the next MacKowski from the jail, while the other deputies cut down the dead man's body and readied the new noose.

"Boys." Talionis tipped his hat.

"Sheriff."

"Big show today—some are calling it a spectacle."

"Yeah."

"Looks to be the whole town here."

Jack Patrick said a few people with children left after the first hanging.

"Yes," the sheriff agreed. "Can't say I approve of children here. But who am I?"

"Gonna hang 'em all today, right in a row?"

"Yes. Gave the duty over to Deputy Preston. His wife was found dead, you know."

"That so."

"Found her naked in a crick, her throat slit to pieces. ...Looked to have been ravaged. A fella with her also killed, shot in the face twice. Got the telegram this morn."

"Did you tell Preston?" Jack Patrick asked.

Lex nodded. "Figured he needed something to get his mind off the subject; I let him do the deeds today."

Again, the list of crimes rolled out in monotone rhythm. The man was said to hang by the neck until dead and the cranking of the lever and drop of the floorboards, the

quick lash of the rope and a supple crackle came over the crowd, and then the spectators talked. Some dispersed.

"More leaving," Jack Patrick said.

"Did have the whole town here."

"Where's Vulmer?"

The old sheriff craned his neck back and looked at the surrounding buildings.

"Probably watchin' from a window somewhere."

The next of kin, a middle-aged Mackowski with scars on his face, emerged from jail.

"I have a final proposition for you boys," Talionis said.

"Final?"

"It's a big job; an easy one, but long."

Matt spit, squinted at the sheriff. "You want us gone, don't you?"

Lex frowned, bobbed his head side to side, then finally said yes he did. "Boys just caused too much trouble. Don't see it stopping anytime soon."

Jack Patrick cleared his throat. "What kind of work are we talking about here?"

"Bounty work?" Matt asked.

"Of a kind."

"Let's hear it."

Deputy Preston listed the man's crimes one after another.

"I need you to transport a couple of outlaws for me, take 'em to justice."

"Criminals here in town?"

"No. They're comin' in on the train this evening."

There was a pause. Deputy Preston cleared his throat and continued reading the list of offenses.

"Why not keep 'em on the train, send them on to their destination?"

Lex looked down, dragged his boot through the dirt. "I don't trust trains... modern things. Criminals target the new. I want these two outlaws taken by horseback, avoiding the railways, the towns. Don't want them to be with other people."

"Why they got to go back?"

"Extradition. They're to be returned to where they committed their crimes."

The man's sentence was read aloud.

"Doing jail time there?"

MacKowski dropped with the usual racket of the quickly dead.

"Hanged."

"And you want us to take them to be hanged?"

"Yes."

"Whereabouts?"

"St. John, north Dakota Territory. A border town, a small town."

"Sounds to be a fair deal, easy enough."

His brother interjected, saying they did not know the land. The last time they wandered without guidance, they nearly perished.

"I'll have a guide for you. There'll be a list of towns where one of you can ride in and get your money. I'll wire the money and have it held for you."

Already another of the MacKowskis stood upon the platform; the deputies were stringing the rope over the upright. A dark stain of urine appeared on the crotch of the man's pants. The three men watched.

"Don't want a guide," Matt said.

"You'll need some way to make it there," the Talionis said. "Traversing without a guide is same as not having one, boys."

"Sounds about right," Jack Patrick said.

"He'll get you there fine. Let you be."

"You don't expect us to come back?" Matt asked.

"It's a long way there."

"Do you think you're saving us from something?"

The lever pulled and the man fell crooked through the hole, his body whipping violently, then gently swayed.

"No," Lex said. "But you have a better chance of living if you take this job."

No one spoke and the crowd whittled down to just a few people. Deputy Preston wiped the vomit from his chin. And under the watchful hidden eyes of Vulmer, the men witnessed the fruits of their labor harvested, as the last of the MacKowskis were executed.

III.

i.

In the evening hours the train rambled to a stop in the town, sputtering fumes, hissing jets of steam in the twilight hours. The brothers watched the beast crouched in its momentary stop. The day sank low so only silhouettes moved as paper puppets before the flames of sunset. And the cowboys cupped their hands around their faces, leaning close to the window so they could see into the oncoming night.

When Lex knocked on their door, after darkness set, he told them the prisoners had arrived and the boys would need to leave town early, at morning's first light.

Raucous George sat in the jail cell eating with his accomplice. She was a woman some years his junior, a mulatto beauty said to be bred from many creeds.

"Who's she?" Matt asked.

Lex fumbled through the keys on his ring.

"The woman? Yes. She's George's partner."

"Pardner?"

Lex inserted the key into the lock and eased it to the right until it clicked and the door swung open with a groan.

"Utah Jones," he said.

The woman looked up at the men when her name was spoken and she smiled a full, white smile. She dropped gaze to the floor so her eyes were veiled behind long-lashed lids. Then she stood. A figure of legs and dark skin, her hair ran down as spindles of pure darkness.

"Come on, George," she said and pulled at the criminal's hand.

He finished chewing the last of the meat off the bone and tossed the remains to the floor. He belched and stood, studied the bounty men.

"Ya'll gonna take me an' Utah here to catch a hangin'?"

"That's right."

Jack Patrick could not remove his eyes from the woman.

"Your name's Utah?"

Matt told his brother to shut up while Utah nodded.

Lex held up his hands to quiet the parties. Then he cuffed the man and woman with shackles and led them out of the jailhouse to the street.

"They're your bounty now. Do with them what you will." Lex waited a measured pause, then smiled a fake smile. "Let me get those bounty papers."

He walked into the jailhouse and Matt turned to his brother and the chained captives.

"This your horse?" Matt asked.

George grunted to signify it was his steed.

Matt took the man by his shackles and helped him mount his horse. Jack Patrick waited with the woman, already mounted and sitting erect on her horse. The townspeople—rousing with the first light of day—passed by; they did not

look to the lawmen, nor did they set their eyes upon the man and woman. Lex sauntered from the office with the bounty papers in hand. His eyes narrowed when he looked to George sitting on his horse.

"Something wrong, Lex?" Matt asked.

The sheriff's eyes widened when he turned to Matt. "No. ...Just that this one here claims to be psychic with his horse."

"How's that?"

"Psychic... Eastern word. Says his horse and him can read each other's thoughts without talking."

"Ain't a thing about—" George began.

"Shut up," Matt said.

"Says his horse fell backwards down a well," Lex said. "Don't know how that happens."

George began to explain, but again he was told to shut up.

"Yes, horses, skittish things. He says the horse thought it was dying—a light at the end of the tunnel and all of that business. Says the horse is connected to the beyond."

The horse snuffled, stamped its hoof and its equestrian stroked its matted mane.

"That horse?" Matt asked.

"That's the story. Good story."

"How'd they get it out of the well?"

"Couple of mules and some ranchers," George said.

"And now they read each other's minds."

"That's what he claims."

"So?" Matt asked.

The sheriff shrugged. "So what? I'm not psychic. I don't know if they're talking with their minds."

Jack Patrick stared at the convict mounted on the horse. "Sounds like nonsense to me," he lied. The words choked out of him. He looked at the glassy eyes of the beast.

Lex bobbed his head from side to side and made a mock frown. "Sure, son."

"What ya got for me?" Matt asked.

As Lex handed the papers to the cowboy, he told him which towns to stop in to get supplies and money transfers, and when to send telegrams to St. John to let them know the whereabouts of the prisoners. Being a border town they're naturally suspicious of any outsiders, he explained. "The guide I got for you, an Indian man, he'll be waiting for you just outside of town here."

"You really think we need a guide?"

Lex shrugged. "You boys know the towns well, I'm sure. This man, Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire knows the spaces between. He won't take any of your pay. Says he works for someone else—who, I don't rightly know. Charitable soul, perhaps."

"Won't let us go without him, eh?"

Lex squinted, shoved his hands deep into his pockets. He puckered his lips, said no. No he wouldn't.

"Psychic horse and an Indian guide working for nothing. Biggest bunch of nonsense I come across yet." Matt spit, shook his head. Slinging his foot into a stirrup, he pulled himself onto the horse. "Send you a telegram when we get there," he said.

"Sure. And remember, if you boys run into any trouble or need anything, you're on your own. —Except that guide I got you. You're as welcome as I am obliged."

ii.

Outside of town the pairs of criminals and bounty hunters met their guide. An Indian without markings of paint or scars, he was not adorned with claws of creature or hides of fur. Instead, a stole of sack cloth wrapped

over one shoulder, exposing the brown shriveled flesh of his opposite nipple. A scabbard with a sword dangled from a loose strap. When Matt asked if he was Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire, the Indian said he was. There were no further introductions and the Indian rode.

The posse followed Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire from the border of civilization into the plains. Matt rode directly behind the Indian with the man and woman following him. Jack Patrick trailed the rest, his rifle lying across his lap. Aurora fell back into the ceaseless waves of grass and became lost in the wake of the wind. Once the town could no longer be seen, Matt told the Indian guide to hold it up a minute. He sidled up next to George.

"Get off the horse."

"What?"

"I want you walking from here on out."

Jack Patrick rode up. He had cocked back the hammer on his rifle. "Everything going all right?"

"Just rather this one walks; don't need him on some mind-reading horse."

"You believe that?"

"No-but," Matt looked to Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire and the Indian stared intently at them. Then the cowboy

looked to George and swung his pistol by its barrel so the butt cracked dull against the criminal's skull. George leant forward, holding the wound. There was little blood, mostly the skin hung open, white and raw. With a kick to his side, the man was completely dismounted. From her vantage point on the horse, the woman watched, unflinching and still.

"From here on out that man walks," Matt said. "We'll sell the saddle next chance we get."

Aurora became a memory when the posse passed by Fullerton. They bypassed Ablion, and traipsed through the empty Nebraskan counties. Matt halted his horse at a set of railroad tracks. In either direction—out into the east and deep into the west—the gravel and steel lines parted the grasses.

"Could follow the tracks," George said. He sat down on one of the rails and rubbed his feet. The wound on his head turned ashen-white with dark smudges, underlayings of red. But Matt shook his head, saying the lines ran east and west, meant for folks who were looking for something. He pulled George to his feet and on they wandered, up past where towns could be spotted as distant destinations,

mirage visions in a grassed desert. The few settlements there existed as outposts for the larger towns of the south and east. And out of the great flats came a river, cutting a broad and even path, meandering east to west.

The northern plains, as the waywards came to call the land, was a barren and disparate place. On they marched with respite in the night, breaks for midday meals. Rarely speaking, their exchanges were limited to prompts for George to hurry himself up. His feet were worn raw.

Every so often they passed a marker of civilization, a relic of other transients: an abandoned wagon with broken wheels, the yawp of the yoke stretched out long and agape, empty bottles filled now with rain water. They found a scorch left in the earth from where a drifter might have stayed some days before.

Matt watched the distant figure of his brother scout out the horizon, the circuitous route he took crisscrossing the expanse before them. Jack Patrick stopped. He looked down to the bed of grasses and beckoned the posse over.

When they came close they saw the cowboy had stopped over a dead body. Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire knelt next to the corpse. The blood had dried on his face, down across

his teeth and onto his chin. Staring blankly into the expanse above, his eyes remained open.

"Wonder who shot this here fella," Jack Patrick said.

Raucous George knelt next to the Indian, said the corpse had been a bandit.

"You know him. He one of your—"

"Never seen him before."

"How do you know he's a bandit then?"

George tugged at the chains hanging out of the man's vest pockets. He has three pocket watches. And after another minute of searching the body, George announced the man also had two wallets.

"What do we do with 'em?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Suppose we should bury him?"

"No," Matt replied; he pulled hard on the horse's reins, so the animal circled and pulled at its bit. "Let the coyotes have him. Give me the watches and money."

George pulled the valuables from the man's pockets and handed them to Matt. "Let me try to close his eyes," he said.

The skin of the eyelids had dried and were stuck open.

"Here," George said and outstretched his hand to Matt. "Give me two coins so I can at least cover his eyes."

Matt flipped a nickel at George and sorted through the rest of the coins.

"All's I got is a couple of silver dollars and a half dollar. Jack Patrick, you got anything smaller?"

Jack Patrick searched his pockets, but could find no money.

George placed the nickel over one eye, leaving the other one exposed. The Indian scooped up a handful of dust from beneath the roots of grass. He parted the corpse's lips and teeth and poured the dirt into the man's mouth. Then he took the boots from the man's feet and threw them as far as he could.

"What kind of Indian did you say you were?" George asked.

The Indian only smiled. The land was breezy and sweetly sang in the rustling of grasses and oncoming rain.

"What kind of Indian are you?" Utah Jones asked a second time.

Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire mounted his stead and the posse rode on, George following, roped to the beasts and barefoot.

iii.

Large cumulous clouds boiled in downy piles across the sky. Patches of shadow from where they blotted the sun scrolled across the prairie lands. The day had grown breezy. Jack Patrick fell back from his scouting position to rejoin his posse.

"Not bad, this weather."

Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire nodded in agreement. Matt acknowledged the comment with a guttural sound.

"Thunderheads," George said.

They looked at the man stumbling behind them on the tether cord.

"How's that?"

"Thunderheads."

He tried to stand up straight to rectify his breathing, but only managed to stumble forward.

"They're thunderheads," he said again. "Big storms under 'em. Pretty lookin' from this far way. "

And the men studied the sweep of a long gray and sheer skirt dragging beneath the clouds.

"That right there—that's rain. Hard rain."

"It's making it all the way to the ground?" Jack Patrick asked.

"What—the rain?"

"Yeah. Is the rain hittin' the ground?"

Utah laughed. "Where else would it go?" she asked.

They looked again to the mass of cloud, watching it morph, bulge and brew. Tapers of vapor rose from where the rain fell so the ground appeared to meet the sky in the space between.

"We just ride around it?" Matt asked.

"George laughed. Cloud there is the size of a county."

"Just ride on through then."

"Better to hunker down here soon. Get cover."

The cloud approached faster, revealing its flat underbelly, a gray placid flat. A distant rumble growled long and low.

"No," Matt said. "We'll ride on."

The storm came. In a cascade of wind and rain, dallops of water blown near sideways in a gale, the storm came.

Booming ruckus resounded across the tempest, then fissures of lightning snaked from the sky to the flushed horizon.

"Get cover, goddamn it!" George yelled.

Matt yelled back in agreement and searched in proximity to the posse for cover, but there was none. They had only themselves. Another splintering of lightning

strikes forked the ground, the electricity colliding with the soil and crackling, hissing.

"Your guns!" George called.

"What?"

"Get rid of your guns—the metal. —Attracts the lightning."

The horses romped wildly and Matt threw his firearms out into the storm. More lightning and another crash. The air tasted of copper. Matt leaned over to his brother and told him to throw the rifle out, away from the posse, but Jack Patrick shook his head and rode headlong into the storm.

"Your brother, is he dumb?"

"Yeah," Matt said and watched his companion disappear into the sheets of rain. The remainder of the band pulled their horses down. Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire stretched out a canvas tarpaulin and they huddled beneath it. The horses bucked and whinnied. But they held fast to the beasts. And sharp packs—little charges of ice—pelted the canvas, popping into the air. The rain became cold and the wind screeched high into the furthest reaches of the storm. The posse buried in shroud awaited respite while Jack Patrick cast himself away, adrift.

And the rain stopped. Much as it had started—sudden and full of sound and fury—it stopped. The sun beamed down, steady and warm. The clouds were again picturesque. The storm, which passed them over, rolled on, its gray skirt sweeping down, sucked behind in a draft.

One by one the horses lumbered back to their hooves. Matt mounted his horse and scanned the surrounding area for his brother. He was there; he rode on his horse, slow trotting and sodden, his rifle sticking up from his saddlebags like a cairn.

Matt rode over. The posse followed.

"You dumb?"

Jack Patrick remained slumped in his saddle. His hat drooped over his eyes.

"Are you dumb?" Matt said again as he approached.

Jack Patrick did not answer.

"Damn it," Matt said. He grabbed at his brother's sleeve. "I said, are you dumb?"

"Might be," Jack Patrick said.

"Coulda been struck by lightnin'," George said. "All's y'gotta be is tall and have some metal on yerself."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Utah spoke. "What were you trying to do out here?"

"I was looking for a sign."

Matt told his brother to shut up.

"A sign like what?" Utah asked.

"Something to let me know we're on the right trail, goin' where we supposed to go."

"We've been bearing north," George said.

Matt began to pull the prisoner along.

"What'd you find?" the woman asked.

But Jack Patrick shook his head and rode on in the footsteps of his brother before him. They beared down true north.

The toll of the sun—its heat and light—dried the clothes of the trolling band. They had a sleepless night on the still-damp grasses. By midmorning of the next day only waterstains in the leather of their hats, their saddlebags and saddles marked the passing of the storm. They watched the passing of the other clouds in the distance, the shadow casting and moving on. Theirs became a sojourn of wandering days, and nights spent huddled by dying fires.

IV.

i.

Flames from the fire built earlier in the evening had already died. Broke down chunks of driftwood glowed dull, like charcoal coals.

"'Bout right for cookin' on," Jack Patrick said.

George nodded, "Yup." He was pulling the bones out of the carcass of a jackrabbit with his fingers. He stopped to lick the blood off his fingertips before setting back to work. Behind him, the woman lay supine, shackled to a stake driven deep into the ground. Even though her chest undulated deep and rhythmic, she was not asleep. The brim of her hat came down past her eyes and belied her wakened state.

"She gonna eat?"

"Yeah," George said. "She'll eat."

"How 'bout you, Matt?"

The cowboy's companion came to the coals. "No, I won't eat here tonight. I gotta ride over yonder, into the town—send a telegram, get our money."

"It's late. You could do it in the morning."

"Just as soon do it now, if you can handle these two here."

"Yeah, I can handle 'em. Are you taking Paul?"

"No." Matt looked into the dusked horizon. "Don't know where he went exactly. He said he'd watch us from afar some nights, try not to intervene with the law matters. —Only if we get ourselves into trouble. ...Must be one of those nights."

Jack Patrick set a kettle of coffee on the coals and shook his head, "Indian stuff. Not certain what it's all about."

"Me neither."

"He ain't like any Indian I ever met," George said.

"Met a lot of Indians in your day?"

"A few, some tribes just plain don't exist anymore. Got killed out, buried in ditches by the hundreds. Others been moved. The government marched 'em right out of their homes and camped 'em right in the middle of a wasteland. Some are still around though. Rode with some Apaches once... mean cusses, them. They cut up their enemies, wear their body parts like jewelry. ...That Indian of yours though, he's different. He ain't like any Indian I ever met."

When the men looked to ask Matt what he thought, he had already gone. Night was falling quickly, covering the path he carved against the twilight.

After sending the telegram to St. John, giving the posse's whereabouts, Matt went to the saloon. An inordinate place, the saloon was filled with men of the town and range—men arguing, playing cards, necking with girls. One such man danced on the bar counter, kicking glasses to the floor, letting them shatter and scatter across the floor. The bartender admonished the man by name and threatened to banish him for life.

Matt stepped over the body of a passed out drunkard.

"Stranger," the bartender called over the din.

"What're ya havin'?"

Looking to the bar, Matt saw it was swabbed with blood and liquor, beads of the fluids and broken glass crystals dripping to the puddle of urine on the floor. "A whore," Matt yelled back and walked to the rear of the saloon, where a trio of females, dressed in ragged fashions were showcasing their bare extremities. They studied the cowboy with complimentary lustful looks.

"You," he said and pointed to the dark haired one.

They lay on a thin mattress, stuffed with straw broken down to a grass pulp. With the door closed, they could hear each

other. The woman reclined and breathed heavily; Matt only stared up at the ceiling.

"Well, whadya want cowboy?" she asked. "You is a cowboy, right?"

"Not anymore."

"Between jobs? Headin' somewheres?"

"No... just goin' north."

The whore grabbed at her own breast and heaved. "Well, we should get down to it. We can do just a poke, but I'm sure a cowboy like you would rather go the whole night."

"Yeah," Matt said. "All night then."

She began to unhook the neckline of her blouse and Matt shook his head.

"Oh, did you want to undress me?"

"No," he said. "Just lay here with me."

"Yeah? It'll cost just the same. I get men who want that sometimes. I guess you fellas need—"

"I want you to call me son."

"...You all right?"

"Yeah."

"You at least gonna take your boots and guns off?"

"No."

"Well, if you decide you want something else, just tell me. I'll let you stick it anywhere y'want for the right price."

Rough as his hands were, the left one slid without sound over her skin to where she had begun to unbutton her blouse, and it rested there. "Thanks ma," he whispered and shut his eyes to the oil glow and the beam of light sopping underneath the door.

Daylight came harsh and refracted through the dirty window pane. In opening his eyes, Matt passed from the abyss back into full-color and dimension. He sat up. He rubbed at his eyes and his gaze swept through the room, eventually coming to rest on the woman laying next to him. Red from her lips smeared down from her chin and the dark circles around her eyes bored deep like vacant sockets. Her skin was white like unbroken, seamless snowfall.

He stood. And he was still as he studied her brow twitching, the deft movements of her limbs, her shallow breathing. Then there was the muted clapping of the facets, the butt of the pistol, as he hit the bones of her face over and over again.

Camp was nearly broken when Matt returned. The Indian first spotted him riding in, though Jack Patrick was the first to call out and wave a single arm in the air. As he rode closer, Matt's pallor became more evident. When he rode closer still, the flecks of blood speckled across his shirt were bright, not yet dried.

"Run into trouble?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Yeah, a little."

"Shoulda gotten yourself a whore," George said. He slapped Utah Jones on the behind and lapped the air with his tongue, cackling.

"Like a dog in heat," Jack Patrick said. "All night these two were humpin' away. I'd separate them, except I was afraid he'd be like a caged dog and chew through his shackles."

"So they—"

"All damned night."

The cowboy and his companion watched Utah Jones sitting stoic and unmoving on her horse.

"She—"

"She's a howler, brother. Surprised you didn't hear it all the way in town."

"Yeah."

"...What happened in town?"

"Fella got a little mouthy at the saloon. Gave him a wallop with the butt of my pistol."

"Oh."

Aside from the remains of ash strewn in the wind and the charred log from the fire, there was no evidence the posse had ever stayed there.

"Are we ready?"

"Believe we are," Jack Patrick said. He readied his gun. "I'll follow at a distance like always."

Matt nodded and trotted over to George. The prisoner's manacles were lashed to a tether trailing behind Matt's horse. Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire was already wading out into the deeper grasses, bearing north between the genesis horizon and the line of night's revelation.

ii.

Like a desert vision borne out of thirst, an oasis appeared. Only the travelers thirsted not and the oasis was a deadened farm. They rode toward the sodhouse. The gate opening in the buckled fence flapped in the breeze.

"Look," Jack Patrick said and nodded to a vacant plot of land, the fresh oblong patches of dirt with lashings of

sticks planted at their feet. Matt nodded in acknowledgement and they led their captives and their guide through the gate.

"Make camp here for the night," Matt said.

Inside the house it was dark and rank, smelling of wet and mildewed grass. The walls themselves were swaths of grass cut and stacked, reinforced with planks of wood. Bundles of thatch made cover for the roof.

"We're not the first ones here," Utah said.

There were open jars on the floor. A lamp with an empty base, save the film of kerosene, sat on the table, the wick a charcoaled scion.

"I know it," Matt said.

He rooted through the pile of tin circles, glass cylinders. Flies swarmed over the remnants.

"Looks to be a whole family buried out there in the fallow field," she said.

Matt held a jar up to his face, smelled it and twisted the lid. The seal did not give.

"Some of the graves were smaller, like children," she said. "Someone had to bury them."

"Maybe a stranger," he said. "The father or mother, someone passing through."

"What happened to the one who buried them?"

"Don't know... wandered on."

"But someone's gotta bury him."

"Who?"

"The last one living... If he was sick-dying."

Matt grasped a jar in each hand, clenched a third between those. He looked at her as he passed toward the door.

"Wandered on," he said. "Left us some rations too.

...Come on."

Jack Patrick and George grazed about the rot of the farm garden. Ripened fruits—the skins shriveled—shrunk back away from the wizened vines. The soil dried together in clumps. Rainfall divots pocked the earth.

"No one here to tend the garden," George said. He dug with his hands under a plant.

Jack Patrick traipsed among the rows of rancidness.

"Homesteaders," he said. "Went on after the family died."

"A 'stedder," George repeated.

"Yeah. They move out his way hoping to find their Zion."

George stopped digging. "You run into one of these homesteaders before?"

"...No." He shook his head.

The criminal began digging again. He unearthed a swollen root, digging it out completely.

"Don't think I'd leave a place like this one. Maybe the farmer'll come back."

Again, Jack Patrick shook his head.

"He can't come back to this place. Others been through here; it's in ruin."

Matt and Utah emerged from the sodhouse, holding jars of preserved food.

"Found some rations," he called to his brother.

"Potatoes," George yelled back and held up the misshapen root.

They ate a dinner of warm—but underdone—tubers, canned fish and dried squash. A fire built from the skeletons of furniture—rungs and canes, backbones and seats of chairs—burnt low in front of the sodhouse. The cowboy sat in the doorway of the abode, picking fish out of a jar with his

fingers. The captives slouched in repose, sleep bearing down on their dying embers of wakefulness. The cowboy's companion lay in the grass. He positioned a flat rock next to the fire to cure his flakes of canned fish with the reflected heat and drafts of smoke.

"Getting' colder."

"Yeah. I know it."

The two ate their fish in respective silence. Coals of the fire tarnished with their cooling.

"Fortunate thing—getting these supplies."

His brother ate the raw fish, but did not move his mouth to answer.

"Y'haven't got supplies in some time. —Forgot to in that last town."

"There was a skirmish."

"Yeah."

Soon only the dozing din, sonorous in their own way, gargled from the depths of George's throat.

"Loud bastard."

"Yeah."

Still, they ate. The cowboy drank the juices of the jar. He set the container down and pulled the map from his

coat. Firelight—what stoked glows were left—backlit the document, making it translucent.

“Not much from here on out,” he said at last.

The other did not respond and only the incoherent articulations and the passage of air from George’s mouth permeated the night. The men looked out into the night and it stretched out as the day had—an eternal scape without respite.

In the darkness following the night, the vivid colorations, visions, came to life. Matt saw a beast fleeing a rainstorm. Tangled in the antlers of the creature was a pair of shackles. And when the animal ran into oblivion, beyond the crags of lightning, the cowboy realized he was alone in a desolate land. He reached for his gun, but where it should have been holstered, a sandal hung by a lanyard instead.

He called out his brother’s name and it echoed back as his own name.

His brother had called his name to him, rousing him from slumber.

“Matt,” he said and shook him. “Matt.”

“The sandal is a curse,” the sickly cowboy said.

"What'd he say?" George asked.

"He's delusional."

"He didn't cook the fish; it must've made him ill."

They rolled Matt onto his side and he vomited.

"There. It's all right," Jack Patrick said and rubbed his back.

"Thanks, ma," Matt murmured.

"He call you his ma?"

"Boil some water on the fire," Jack Patrick said. "I only want him to drink what's been cleansed."

Matt fell back into slumber; he could hear the din of the outside world in his percipience. Remnants of a city constructed of tents flapped in the wind. Smoke blew through the air. Voices came from all around him, calling for him to wake. But he wandered through the ghost town, peering into the apertures ripped and worn in the tent canvas. In one tent, a dog dug a hole to hide a pocket watch he clenched in his jowls. Then he crossed the street to look in a church. The pews were replaced with troughs of sand. Where a preacher should have stood, the antelope with the shackles in its antlers lay as a sacrifice. A bird pecked at the wound in his hide. He passed on from the

church, his vision turning to the wild distance—a range of frozen mountains—calling him by name.

A blind auspex appeared in the streets and told Matt to sit. But Matt handed the man the sandal he carried, waited for the man to weigh the item on his scale, then wandered on.

"Damn it, Matt," Jack Patrick said and slapped his brother across the face.

Matt stirred. His eyelids fluttered.

"Drink it," Jack Patrick said and he poured warm water over his brother's lips. George and Utah stood over him. The Indian burnt a bundle of sage as incense, wafting the smoke toward Matt. The cowboy's nostrils flared as he inhaled the smoke. His lips parted and he exhaled. The Indian chanted as a byzantine. Again, sleep came over the cowboy and he passed over the abyss into dream.

He woke when the compress on his forehead was changed. Whatever he had been dreaming, it was gone now.

"Ride on south horse," he said.

His brother told him to hush, he needed to rest.

And he shut his eyes, expecting to be privy to further visions, but there were none. Time passed in phantasmagoric

fashion: waking and the odd-shaped curious happenings of the people he recognized there. What they said made no sense. Then the indeterminable darkness. Jerked back to wakefulness and collapsing into slumber.

iii.

In this time Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire told of a vision he had before leaving Aurora. The convicts, Jack Patrick and the Indian sat in a circle around the recumbent man. Over his body they passed a cask of liquor found buried in the corner cabinet amongst the rotted cans of vegetables. And after they each had drunk, the story of his vision began.

First there was the setting: He wandered as a man not visible to the rest into a vacant place—a village. He was a ghost scout. And he stopped his story there, explaining that a ghost scout was an Indian who could kneel down and pray so hard he actually became a ghost capable of walking to his enemies' camp without being seen.

George said he had a horse like that once.

But what he noticed about this village was that all the inhabitants were heading to the same place. The inhabitants were neither fair-skinned, nor were they dark.

They were in-between, where the shades didn't matter. And the non-descript inhabitants were going to the watering hole at the center of town. The water they drew from the well was as clear as rainwater, cold enough to clench a man's teeth. Clench them so hard the teeth might crack.

Jack Patrick smiled as he heard about the water.

And these villagers, they did not drink the water. Instead they carried the water in goblets to the gardens—for there were gardens surrounding the town. When they poured the water on the crops, the plants instantly bore fruit. The leaves of the most massive flora fanned out and created a swath of shade comparable to a cloud's shadow. In the shadows the men raped the women and when it was done, the women ate the men's flesh until there were only women with full bellies like they were with child and wetted skeletons. And they danced together until the sun burned through the leaf canopy and scorched all those beneath into dust.

Matt opened his eyes and Utah sat with him. She hummed a ditty he recognized as a piano piece from a brothel. And he waited for slumber and its disorientation to overcome him. But it did not come.

"Miss Jones," he said.

She looked over and smiled.

"Are you with the living now?"

When he shifted, his bones ached.

"George and I thought you'd be dead for certain, the way you were sick. But that brother of yours and that Indian..."

"Where is Jack Patrick?"

"Went with Paul to gather some more fruits. They've been boiling fruits in water and making you drink it," she said.

His tongue, roughened with burns, rubbed the roof of his mouth. The flesh there was raw too. Outside the doorway, George stoked the fire.

"He left you here with me."

"Where are we goin' to go?"

Matt reached for his belt.

He took your guns. "You were near crazy," she said.

George shook his head, laughed to himself.

Matt sat up. "How long was I—"

"How long were you sick?"

"Yeah."

"More than a week now. Ten days maybe."

George nodded. "Been long enough for the weather to change. Season's changin' now. Nip in the air."

He stood and the woman tried to hold his hand, but he shirked her assistance and stood unhindered. He could see now over the plains, past the garden of decay, to where the saddled figures rode with desiccated fruit for him to drink.

Against the posse's wishes, Matt saddled up the next morning. Jack Patrick reluctantly gave him back the pistols. The cowboy slumped forward on his horse. The beast neighed weakly. Over by the sodhouse, the Indian tended a fire.

"Let's get on," he said.

An attempt to start the horse into motion by kicking it in the side only prompted the animal to swish its tail.

"Maybe we should stay a couple more days," Jack Patrick said.

"No. We're too far behind now."

He kicked the horse again. The beast remained unmoved.

"No need to hurry." Jack Patrick squinted as he spoke and he turned his head to look over the place they were departing from.

George nodded. "There ain't a statue on when we gotta be killed."

"We're gettin' on outta this place," Matt said.

Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire began kicking the coals of the fire into the house. He squatted down to fan the flames with a discarded rag. Little licks of fire leapt from the rubbled logs. He laid the rag atop the flames and it caught on fire. Soon the surrounding pieces of rubbish—the table and discarded items of tenants—also caught on fire.

"There," Matt said. "Now there's nothing to stay for."

"Nothing to return to," Utah said.

And when Matt kicked his horse a third time, it still did not move; it was only in the thick blankets of smoke, when George took the horse by the bridal bit that the posse continued on, the damned leading the way to their perdition.

V.

i.

Trodding and trodding across the span of day inevitably inched the band of bounties and hunters towards their destination and their encampment for the night. With their progress, the nights became colder. And now, with the

onset of dusk, all who lived breathed smoke into the oncoming darkness.

"Could be a frost tonight," George said.

"Probably right," Jack Patrick agreed.

The Indian consulted Matt discretely, puffs of smoke betraying their conversation. After a few more muted words, Matt turned to his prisoners.

"We need a fire," he said.

The woman dismounted her horse. As she breathed, the vapor rose sheer and veiled.

"There's no wood," she said.

"Gather grasses then. We need a fire."

She began to speak again, but Matt looked down on her and she seemed to freeze, the pallor of her skin iced in the light of a waning moon.

"Come on darlin'," George said. He took her by the shackles and led her away from camp, the Indian following.

The fire was fed the dried grasses during the periodic visits of the woman. She placed the gathered fuel on the meager flames, and as they exploded in heat and light, she turned away. The blades subjected to the flames squirmed as

gorgon snakes. Soon they became solemn sticks of delicate ash and she passed beyond the vision of the men.

"Is it safe for her to be out there by herself?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Safe for who?" Matt asked in return.

The fire hissed, smoking heavy and wet. Somewhere in the darkness they could hear the thrushing of the woman's labors.

"Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire is watching her."

Raucous George squatted by the flames. He rooted around the burnt patch of grass, taking smaller bits of grass and placing them on the coals.

"Lucky thing too," he said.

"How's that?"

"She'd've killed you both by now if it weren't for your damned Indian."

The brother sat idle, unable to confront the figure hunched by the fireside. The woman blanketed the coals with another load of grass. Flames leapt up, illuminating the men in its immediateness. The pupils of their eyes dilated, the surrounding irises expanding, eclipsing the pinholes of black. The woman was already gone.

"I've been all over the plains," George said. He adjusted, going from a squat to sitting cross-legged on the ground. "I've rid with some real brutes—men who fancy themselves cold-blooded criminals. They rack up bounties and kill their hunters."

"And you're meaner than them."

"No. She is. I'm not. ...I've also rid along with good men and they don't last long."

The flames fell quickly into a rash of orange speckles and the brittle boned remnants of the cremated. No one spoke to interrupt George and he continued.

"For some reason, those men—the ones they call good men—believe the world of their towns—all their laws and jurisdiction, the order of things—apply out here. How you and I and Utah survive is the same."

"You're not surviving," Matt said. "I'm taking you to a town where the law's gonna kill you."

Utah laid another clump of grass on the coals and the patch of land once again conflagrated. George's countenance was visible, his eyes roving from one brother to the other.

"Utah's alright with your Indian 'cause she's three-quarter red-skinned herself. They don't kill their own

kind. Animals don't kill their own kind. You boy is the real killers aren't ya?"

Again the woman vanished into vacancy, in spots where the moon's reflected rays could not combat the campfire. George smiled.

"You can't just deliver me and Miss Jones. It goes beyond that. Where'd you fellas lose the trail?"

"We're still on course for St. John," Matt said.

The outlaw man laughed. "No, I was speaking in metaphor."

"I prefer English."

George laughed more. He wiped at the corners of his mouth with his fingertips. Suddenly he stopped the chuckles and asked who it was who led the brothers into temptation.

Matt sighed. "Maybe you've talked your way outta this type of—"

"You survived it though. Whatever it was y'all gone through, you came out and the world was different. Wasn't it?"

Darkness had again fallen; broken embers remaining before the men. The prisoner sat as a shadowed figure.

Jack Patrick spoke. "It wasn't that different."

"Shut up," Matt said.

Utah Jones tossed another bunch of grasses onto the coals. Once the flames threw light into the late hours, she looked at George. His look returned hers and with his eyes he silently sent her back into the shadows. Jack Patrick and Matt stared at one another. Without removing his gaze, Jack Patrick said once again the world wasn't that different.

"Goddamn it," Matt swore. He stood and walked out past the fire's dying glow to where the woman, watched over by Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire, gathered grasses to temporarily fuel against the night.

ii.

"Think it might be wise if you go ahead of us," Matt said to his brother.

"Think there could be dangerous country ahead?"

"No."

Jack Patrick nodded.

Behind them George, Utah and Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire packed up camp, stomped out the coals of the fire.

"They're going to die," Matt said.

"I know it."

"It'd be useful if you could just stay ahead of us. See what's out there and ride back in the evening hours. Tell us what we're going to see."

So Jack Patrick did as his brother wished and rode ahead of the posse. Then, as the sun hung low on the horizon out to his left, he yawed his horse around and trotted back to camp.

"What'd you see?" Matt asked.

"Grass."

"Nothing to be wary of?"

"Not unless you've gotten suspicious of grass."

The next day Jack Patrick reported there was still more grass—perhaps a little more hilly than the previous days. Utah snickered when he delivered her report.

"Means we're getting closer," Matt said and stirred their potted dinner.

After a week of scouting ahead and reporting back on a nightly basis, Jack Patrick did not return. Matt built the fire larger than usual that night and kept it burning past the midnight hours. As the sliver of moon rose and crossed the sky, the fire died.

"Your brother's gone," George said.

"He's all right." Matt looked off into the darkness. "Ain't in his nature to disappear. He's fine." Somewhere between him and his brother, Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire rode.

Utah cuddled up next to her man, pulling him by the arm into her. "I'm sure he is," she said. "He could've gone off and gotten himself a lady."

"He wouldn't do that."

"Maybe he saw what was out there ahead of us and it was so wonderful he kept going."

"You can shut up."

George pressed his index finger over Utah's lips and she smiled like a child sworn to advent secrecy.

iii.

The posse spotted a wagon down a light slope. Jack Patrick stood guard next to it. A woman and her children sat in the back. There was no beast to be found; only an empty yoke lay in the grass. Raucous George grumbled as they descended; for he would only be forced to walk back up the slope later. The visages of the woman and her children

became more pronounced as the posse drew nearer: she had with her a boy, a girl and an infant.

"Who are these people?" she asked Jack Patrick.

"Friends," he replied loud enough for everyone to hear. Even Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire heard from his perch upon the hillside.

"Jack Patrick," Matt said. He turned to the woman in the wagon, "Ma'am."

The captives engaged the children. Utah Jones made eyes with the infant, so the infant laughed. George performed magic tricks for the boy and girl—passing a coin from one hand to the next, then making it disappear again right before their eyes.

"This here is Marie." The woman smiled at Matt so her teeth showed.

"I take it this is why you haven't been back to give a report."

"He was watching over us. We're abandoned out here."

Matt shifted his hat back on his head, exacting the brim so he could look to the woman unobstructed. "Sorry to hear that, ma'am, but we got us a couple of bounties needin' to be transported up north for some hangin's."

The woman looked to the man and woman playing with her children, then to the Indian on the hill. Her lips parted, her teeth inside barely showing. A breeze tousled her hair. Her hair was the color of wild summer wheat.

"They won't try anything," Jack Patrick said. He touched her arm.

"Who?"

"Our bounties."

"Which ones are your bounties? I can't tell."

Matt laughed. "The ones playing with your children."

"Oh," Marie said and looked to the shackles rusted, camouflaged to the tones of their skin. The coin disappeared into George's hand. He opened a clenched fist, his palm was barren and the children laughed.

"We'll make camp here tonight," Matt said. "You got any rations?"

"Some," Marie said. Heath took most of our supplies along with the horse when he left me and the children.

The wayward peoples aggregated by a fire fed with plentiful sticks and occasional logs. They ate jerky and jarred fruit, some unleavened meal cakes dipped in coffee. There was little conversation and when night came—full and black,

emblazoned with scars of stars and momentary scratches, lacerations of meteorites—sleep came upon them all until only the brothers remained awake. Even Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire slept in the camp, snoring loudly. Marie and her children slept where they had slept before: in the back of the wagon. Utah Jones and Raucous George twisted together, staked and chained to one another upon the ground. Adding wood to the fire, Jack Patrick and Matt kept the fire burning at an even and steady rate.

"Can't have you scoutin' ahead if you're not comin' back," Matt said.

"Wasn't going to leave her out here alone. The trail was clear. I figured you'd find us just fine."

"We almost missed you, being down here in a low spot."

"Well, you didn't."

"Left me alone with a couple of criminals too."

"You had Paul."

Matt snapped a stick in half and shoved it under a log where it did not palpitate in flames, but glowed red and steady. "What are you thinking?"

"About what?"

"Them." He nodded to the wagon where slurred articulations of dreams drowned in the vast cosmos.

Jack Patrick shrugged. "Can't leave 'em here."

"You want them to go with us."

"Her husband left her and her children. Took the horses."

"Know where the husband went?"

"She said he told her he'd be back in couple of days; went westward to a town over yonder—probably to gamble. That was nearly a week and a half ago."

"Might be dead. Shot over a card game—those things happen in these small towns."

Jack Patrick shook his head. "Don't think so. She said her husband was a U.S. Marshall, got orders to be a border agent up in the Dakota Territory."

"You mean he still is a Marshall. He just left them here."

"Yeah."

Matt gathered a handful of twigs. As he laid the fuel to the flame, he asked his brother if he thought the woman and her children could be saved by riding with them. Sap and resin crackled, the flames bleached out the night. Whatever his brother's answer, it was unspoken and awash in the vigil firelight.

As it was his duty, Jack Patrick awoke earlier than the rest of his party. A frost had fallen heavy during the night, stiffening the long blades of grass into spears. He checked his rifle—the slap of the bolt broke the serenity of the morning. He studied the camp to see if he awakened anyone. Only his horse turned its head, spewing streams of steam out its nostrils. Jack Patrick walked to his horse, patting it on the neck. Dew glistened in its fur. He placed one foot in the stirrup, hefted his other leg up and over the saddle. The seat was cold. He sheathed the rifle, pulled at the reins and circled camp. Marie lay with her children in the back of the wagon. They slept soundlessly now. The criminals also remained together, in captive slumber. Somewhere off in the grasses, Matt murmured in his dreams and the Indian too dreamt.

Clucking his tongue, Jack Patrick prodded his horse along and they cantered toward the north country, grass splintering under the weight of the hooves.

Matt roused himself from his swarded bed and sodden flannel saddle blanket. The woman was already awake. Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire was awake and set out far from camp on horseback. The criminals slept still.

"Wasn't certain if I should wake you," she said.

Matt rubbed his eyes, the dull gray rays of the sun blinding him. "That brother of mine get on yet?"

"Yes. Must've been early. We've been up for some time now."

In opening his eyes Matt saw the woman wrapped a blanket around her torso. Under the blanket another life throbbed at her chest.

"She gets hungry early. The other children have learned to sleep through it."

He diverted his eyes and tugged his boots on, his heel popping to the bottom. "We got an extra horse," he said. "Been using him as a pack mule. We can rig him up to your wagon there if you like."

He looked to the wagon.

"You don't let the man—George—you don't let him ride a horse."

"That's right."

"Mind if I ask why?"

"Just safer that way."

"Oh," the woman said. The infant stopped suckling and cooed. She unwrapped the blanket, exposing her breast. Matt dusted off his pants, cleared his throat, then picked the

dirt out of the welting of his boot. The woman used her free hand to clothe her nakedness.

"So you're willing to take us out of here."

"Not my call, but you can come with us if you're headin' north."

"We were heading north until Heath left us."

"North where?"

"Place called St. John."

Though he had to squint into the phosphorus of sunrise and the shape of the woman was revealed through her thin blouse, he looked to Marie.

"I've heard of St. John," he said.

iv.

As the nights grew longer and colder, the evenings became more routine. The posse did not search for a good spot for the night; they simply made camp wherever they happened to be in the last light of day. Small game they shot during the day was hastily skinned and cooked over a bracken fire of sticks, grass and bits of dried animal dung. The children complained drowsily of the bitterness surrounding them. They snuggled under the blanket with

Marie and Jack Patrick. A metal stake was driven into the ground and the criminals shackles secured there.

Utah and George did not fornicate any longer—George was too tired. Instead, Utah Jones rubbed his feet until they leaked with the sweat of blisters. And when sleep came, they held each other close for warmth.

Only Matt stayed awake, stoking the fire, staring into it until everything, except the flames, was reduced to a vaporless ether. If the Indian was still awake and watching over him, he could not see the man. He used the late hours to plot their course in his head. He figured they were most of the way through the Dakota Territory, approaching the border and their common destination, St. John.

Breaking the routine for the first time in weeks, Jack Patrick strayed from the heat of the woman, her body and her family and stayed up with Matt. They did not build a fire that night. Daylight vanquished before they reached a spot with dry grass or wood. Unilluminated clouds blotted out the sentinel stars. Far off, ever north and slightly west, a pinhole of light seared off and on, burning in the vast nothing.

"You didn't tell me she was bound for St. John."

Jack Patrick was inspecting the stock of his rifle, though the darkness of the night made it impossible to see. "Just a coincidence, there's not too many towns up this way."

"Her husband was supposed to be their lawman."

"She tell you?"

"Yeah."

"You tell her we're headin' that way too?"

"No."

The two men stared out at the light flickering on the horizon. Neither spoke for some time.

"Looks like we got neighbors," Jack Patrick said at last.

Matt was slow to respond. "Yeah I saw that," he said. "Must've found a stash of fuel."

"Could be burnin' their extra weight—papers, rotted food...."

"Y'might be right."

They were silent again. The magic of frost, how it grows clinging to the temporarily dead, was taking place.

"Probably best we didn't have ourselves a fire tonight."

"The cloud cover'll hold in some heat. We can save some of our scraps an' have a fire later."

"...I was thinking our neighbors might not be so friendly."

"I know it. Wonder about people passin' through here like us."

"Best they don't know we're here."

Jack Patrick set his rifle down and it crunched in the hoared grasses.

"Could've had neighbors before—maybe dozens of 'em—had 'em when we had a fire burning in the night."

"Yeah."

"We just couldn't see them beyond our own light. They could've built a fire too. We would've never known the other one existed. ...Because of the light."

"No different than if they hadn't built that fire tonight. Then we'd all be just sitting in the dark."

His brother agreed. They both fixated on the distant light as it passed in and out of existence. Matt spoke so it was plain. "This is trouble," he said. And when the spot in the darkness extinguished itself, the opaque it left behind became confused with slumber.

They continued on, perpendicular to the path the sun burned through the haze of day. The drifting plains were patched with woods and open sloughs of the grasses. The posse stretched out in a long disconnected line, with the Indian leading the way. Jack Patrick rode next to the wagon so he could talk to Marie as she drove.

"Your brother doesn't want us here," she said.

Jack Patrick looked at the children in the back of the wagon before answering. They listened.

"True," he said.

They watched Matt further ahead, dragging George behind his horse, the man's legs unable to keep pace with the horse's. Silent and unyielding in her gaze, his captive lover looked down on him and he kept walking.

"He is a hard man," said Marie.

Jack Patrick shook his head. "He's no different than me."

Again, George stumbled and Matt yanked at the tether between them, jerking him back to his feet. Miss Jones tried to intervene, but Matt pointed for her to ride on.

Jack Patrick continued to converse lowly with Marie.

"We're taking those two to St. John for execution," he said.

Marie pulled on the reins until the wagon halted; Jack Patrick too circled his horse so he sat still with Marie. Casually glancing over his shoulder, Matt did not stop.

"We can't go to St. John."

"You think Heath'll be there?"

"No. But—we don't have to go there now. I wanted to go with you so we'd end up somewhere different."

The children tried to interrupt with questions regarding their father. But they were told he was dead now and they'd never see him again. The eldest cried, pulling the quilt up over her face.

"Jack Patrick!" Matt called from ahead. He waved his arm and called his brother's name a second time.

"I should—" He looked to Marie and she sat demure, the reins slack in her hands, her children whimpering. "I better see what he wants."

He kicked his horse with the heel of his boot and galloped to where Matt and the rest of the posse gathered at the highpoint over a slough.

"Look here," Matt said when Jack Patrick slowed his horse.

Down in the morass a thousand creatures grazed, a dark writhing sea of brown fur.

"Bison," George said. He looked to his lover and she smiled.

"There's so many of them," Jack Patrick said.

"Good eating too."

The wagon trundled up behind the posse and the woman gasped. Her children asked what the creatures were and how big they were. Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire had looked intently on the animals when he turned his head to the distant skyline. "See," he said and pointed. They all fell silent and turned their attention to where he pointed, where dark clouds unfurled across the sky, chugging from a long vessel streaming through the open. The smoke spilled out of the stack furiously and then quickly settled into complacency. It took even longer for the clouds to dissolve, making it easy to track the past course of the train. The engine and its cars disappeared behind a screen of trees, where the smoke betrayed its progress. A short high-pitch burst resounded over the bluff. The animals' heads rose simultaneously, and they were still. Another screech reprised itself in the former sound's echo. Then they moved and there was rumbling like distant thunder.

The boy asked for his mother by name.

"It's all right," she said.

Below the sea of dark fur rolled in tumult and waves, the rumbling unbroken.

"Stampede," George said.

The mass of beasts ran up the opposite slope, away from the posse. Under their feet, under their horses' hooves, the ground clamored. The horses cantered about in place, the men saying, whoa there.

"Give me your rifle," Matt said. His horse tossed its mane.

"Why?"

"Give it here, Jack Patrick."

Jack Patrick unsheathed the gun and drew it out in a single sling action. His brother seized it and shouldered the butt. With a single shake of the hand, his riding glove fell off and he wrapped his finger around the trigger and squeezed. A clap like a tree splintering from lightning broke over the rumbling of the retreating beasts. The smoke dissipated and the thunderousness of the pounding hooves grew distant. A single lump of fur, amorphous in form, lay lifeless and left behind.

In contrast to their normal routine, the band of waywards made camp early. Wood gathered from the grove of

trees on the broad face of the bluff blazed in a makeshift fire pit. Meat carved from the dead bison's bones roasted on sticks in the twilight hours. And in the depressed land the sun set with more haste than usual. The darkness, however, challenged by the fire became all the more opaque beyond the reaches of its faintest rays. Smoke like carnal incense, infused with cremated chunks of gristle and fresh buffalo chips, permeated the air.

The bounty and the bounty men, the cast-off family alike ate around the fire. Only Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire did not partake in the feast; he said it was an unholy thing to eat the flesh of the beast and leave the bones and innards to rot and litter the land. When dusk fell, he was last seen gutting the animal, severing the heart out of the great cavern of ribs. As he worked, he had chanted low and rhythmically.

Now the chanting ceased, replaced by the hiss of fen logs thick with moss slowly incinerating. There would be a frost tonight as there had been several nights past—each one more embittered than the previous—but nowhere in the spectral glow of the fire would frost form tonight.

"I suspect that train was goin' into Sheyenne," Matt said. He consulted the tatters of his maps, made

translucent by the flames. In his free hand he held a rib fresh off the fire.

"How far's that?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Hard to say out here; everything being spread out like it is."

George spat a chunk of fat into the fire. "Guess it to be about five, seven miles," he said. He rested his hand on Utah's leg, her skirt pulled up to expose her legs.

"Will we be stoppin' there?" she asked. Her voice was soft, almost pleading.

"Reckon we might."

"We need supplies," Jack Patrick said.

"Us too," Marie said.

Matt picked the last of the meat off the bone and tossed it into the blaze. He looked into the night, shielding his eyes with his hands. Somewhere out there, rooting around the shadows, Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire tended to the dead.

VI.

i.

Without further discussion the group rode to Sheyenne. Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire did not return to the camp, nor did

he follow them on the trail. He simply vanished in the night, leaving the bison bones scattered in the grass. Jack Patrick made mention of their missing guide and Matt only shook his head to say he was an Indian, a damned Indian and he would never understand their kind.

When the small squat structures of Sheyenne stumped out across the horizon, Matt said, "Listen. These are the rules for going into town: When we get into town, I want Jack Patrick to take the criminals straight to the jail—locked up and put under guard."

Jack Patrick nodded dutifully.

"Marie, I want you to find an inn, get us two rooms there." He paused and took out a couple of silver dollars and handed them to the woman. "I'll see to getting our supplies. We're only staying one night here. The next stop will be St. John."

Matt reined his horse around, pulling George to his feet. Together they staggered towards the respite of Sheyenne.

Just as he was instructed, Jack Patrick took the criminals of the posse to the sheriff's office. The office itself was part of a longer strip of slat front buildings, wedged

between the apothecary and taxidermy. A young man with a star pinned on his vest leaned on the porch railing.

"Got some outlaws, do ya?"

Jack Patrick lashed Utah Jones's horse to the hitching post and nodded. "We're lookin' for a place to hold 'em up for the night."

"You're passin' through then."

"Yeah."

"These here—and the man pointed to Utah and George—these are your bounties."

"That's right."

"And you're a bounty man."

"Me and my brother."

The man stood up straight, his eyes narrowed on the criminals, then on Jack Patrick.

"Y'got the papers on them?"

"Brother does."

"Where's this brother at?"

"Gettin' supplies."

Putting his hands in his pockets, the man stepped down off the porch, into the street. He circled the man and woman, pausing to look at her backside.

"See," he said, his eyes still fixated on Utah's curves. "Being Sunday, the sheriff ain't in. He usually makes the calls on these situations."

"We're askin' for one night."

"All right." The man broke his stare from Utah's body and looked at Jack Patrick.

"Come on in. We'll figure something out."

At the general store, Matt haggled the prices of coffee and beans and salt. The shopkeeper was a good-natured man with a ruddy complexion and a full beard. He showed the cowboy a pair of spurs. When Matt asked what they were for and the man said for kicking the horse, Matt wrinkled his nose.

"Sell 'em to ya cheap. Doesn't hurt the horse a bit."

My brother might be interested. How much?"

"Ten dollars."

Matt laughed out loud and shook his head.

"Alright. Eight dollars."

"Make it seven."

"Now these are made all the way out in—"

"Seven."

"Alright there, sonny, seven it is. You musta been a horse trader," the shopkeeper said. He slapped Matt on the

shoulder and laughed. "Or a clergyman. —They's the only ones who can finagle the goods outta me like that."

Matt feigned a smile too. "No, I'm just passin' through, that's all."

"Fair enough. Come from a ways out, did ya?"

"Yeah," Matt said. He counted the money out. "Got a ways to go too."

The shopkeeper watched Matt count the money; tallying the bills in his head as they were doled out. "Explains the supplies," he said.

When he finished counting, Matt stacked the bills on top of each other and set the remaining change on top.

"With it gettin' cold like it is, I was wonderin' if you knew of any good shelters between here and St. John—any cliffsides, caves, old lean-tos..."

The shopkeeper crunched the money into his fist and leaned on the counter. "Yeah, yeah, I know one. Just one though. A little house, well not little—fairly large house about a full day north of here. Nice house."

"No one lives there?"

"No. A family lived there some years ago. The husband had it built. He was a rich man from back east. Moved out

here with his family for seclusion. That's why the house is a full day out."

"They end up moving into town?"

"Died. The whole family. —It's only a day out when we don't got snow. Get some snow on the ground and it's a trek. ...House just sits there now. Pretty house from what I hear."

ii.

The sheriff office contained three jail cells in a row along the back wall.

"You," the deputy pointed to George, get in that one. He shoved George into the cell on the far left. "And you," he said to Utah. "Go over there." He guided her into the cell on the right, leaving the cell between them vacant.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you," Jack Patrick said.

"As the acting sheriff, I can jail my prisoners how I like. Don't want them tryin' anything together."

Jack Patrick looked to his bounties pacing in the confines of their cells. "I suppose you're right."

The deputy sat down at the desk in the corner of the office. "Now we got some rules here."

"All right."

"First thing is, these ain't my prisoners. I'm not responsible for them."

"You want money."

"A dollar per prisoner."

"Fine."

"Also, you and your brother need to keep the night watch on them. I'll stay here late, but I ain't stayin' all night."

Jack Patrick nodded.

"And—this one's the town law—there's no pistols in town. That rifle I saw y'got in the saddle is fine. But if you an' your brother got pistols they need to be kept here until you're ready to leave town."

Jack Patrick stood up and straightened his hat.

"Where you goin'?"

"I gotta get my brother. He holds the money, the bounty papers and carries the pistols. You're gonna have to watch those two for a minute."

Matt asked the deputy what he was doing as soon as Jack Patrick opened the door to the office. The deputy stopped rubbing at his crotch, saying dirty things to Utah, and spun around.

"I'm the deputy, acting sheriff," he said. The lines made by pressing his face against the jail bars framed his countenance. He extended his hand, but Matt didn't shake it.

"You got our prisoners separated," Matt said.

"I told him it wasn't a good idea," Jack Patrick said.

The deputy adjusted his hat, pulled at his vest. "I need your pistols, as I'm sure your brother here—"

The pistols and their belt dumped onto the desk with a dull clamor.

"And the fee for tonight—"

Matt tossed the man two silver coins and the deputy held them up to his eyes to inspect them.

"You also need our papers."

"Yes. That's correct."

Matt withdrew the yellowed papers from inside his long coat. He unfolded them for the deputy to see.

"I'll just stick those in the file for the sheriff to take a gander—"

Matt folded the papers back up. "I'll hold on to them."

"I can't let—"

"Listen here lawman, these papers are the only proof I got saying these bounties, the prices on their heads, is mine. You think me and my brother are some greenhorn pistoleers. The one part of your conditions I'll agree to is that one of us stays here with the prisoners."

A crooked smile curled at the corners of the deputy's mouth. "Well, all right," he said.

"I'm taking the first watch," Matt said. "Jack Patrick, Marie got us a room across the hall from her at the inn. Get some shut-eye and relieve me 'round two."

Just as the sun set, the deputy uncorked a tall round bottle and set out two glasses for himself and Matt. They sat at the desk, the deputy eyeing Utah Jones.

"Know any card games?" the deputy asked.

Matt shook his head and poured wine into the glasses. They drank. The deputy set down his glass, empty—save the beads of wine creeping down the side of the glass and making circles around the base.

"You ever give that one a poke?" He nodded to Utah.

Matt looked at her, curled into a ball on the floor, her skirt pulled tight around her knees. "No," he said.

George slept on the floor, nearest to the bars, but still out of reach from Utah.

"Fine lookin' woman, that one."

Matt finished his drink. "You could teach me a card game."

The deputy laughed. "Don't got any cards." He poured them more wine from the bottle. "I know a game," he said.

"We don't need cards?"

"No," the deputy stood up and took Matt's confiscated pistols down from the hook on the wall. "You look like a man who likes to decide his own fate."

He opened the chamber of the pistol and let the bullets fall out across the table. One rolled off the desk and bounced across the floor. Fumbling to catch another stray bullet, the deputy flattened his hand at the table's edge and let one roll into his palm. He loaded the bullet back into the gun and rotated the chamber around.

"What the hell kind of game is this?" Matt asked.

Without answer, the deputy raised the gun to his own head. "Trick is you can't look at the gun," he said. Then he pressed the trigger. There was a muted click, followed by silence. Both men breathed heavily.

"Now you," the deputy said. He set the gun on the table.

Matt took the pistol. It throbbed in his hand, cold and slippery. He set it down and wiped his hands on his pants.

"High stakes gamblin'," the deputy said.

When Matt touched the gun again it was tacky, the metal combining with the moisture of his hand. It still pulsated, but less so as he pressed the small circle of the muzzle into his temple. He thumbed back the hammer until it ratcheted into place.

The deputy smiled. "Go ahead, bountyyman; see what your fate is."

Matt lowered the gun, disengaging the hammer. "I already know it," he said.

The deputy chuckled. "Well, looks like you're stuck here." He stood up, stretched, and began towards the door.

"You're leaving?" Matt asked.

"Gonna find me a whore, if there's one who'll still have me in this town." He shook his hand in his pocket so the silver dollars clinked together. "Try my luck there," he said.

iii.

Jack Patrick came down the hallway of the inn. He had stopped in the parlor downstairs, ate and drank before going upstairs for the night. The rooms of the two rented rooms faced each other. Marie's door was shut and there was no light coming from under it. Jack Patrick matched the number on his key to the number on his door and opened it. After he entered the room, he shut the door without locking it. In the darkness of the unlit room, his eyes adjusted and he could see the ghostly forms of the bed, the nightstand and dresser.

He took off his boots and pants, shirt and hung his hat on the bedpost. Then he pulled back the curtains from the window. What little light there was from outside, whitened the room. He lay on his back. Shadows did not move in the two-tone darkness.

From across the hall there was a creak, a door carefully opening and shutting. A moment later his own door opened just as carefully. The yellow light of the hallway flooded the room, silhouetting the figure of Marie.

"Jack Patrick," Marie whispered.

He cleared his throat and said yes.

The door closed and darkness was again upon them both.

"Marie," he said and he could hear her footsteps stumbling towards him. When he outstretched his arms, he felt her skin through the sheer fabric. Her children were asleep across the way, dreaming and murmuring. Strands of her hair brushed the side of his face and he felt her lips press against his. He said her name again and she too called him by name. Then she took his hand and guided it to her breast. And though his eyes had again adjusted to the darkness—and as he removed her nightdress, he could see her spectral shape—he shut his eyes and they fell reposed together into the shrouds of blankets.

The clock on the wall chimed, rousing Matt from near-slumber. He looked at the clock face and figured the time to be three o' clock. Jack Patrick was late. Silently he cursed his brother. In their cells the prisoners slept. Matt looked out the window, but the reflections of the glass masked what lay beyond. He walked to the door and opened the porthole into the night. The cold wind wicked the sweat from his clothes. His eyes adjusted to the night. He looked back on the prisoners asleep in their cells. He quietly closed the door to the jail and sallied out into the street.

The buildings with their gaping plots of unlit windows loomed on either side of the street. Above, the clouds blanketed the stars—their presence made evident solely by the lack of starlight. The inn was at the far end of the street, the other side of town. As he traveled the length of the road, Matt gravitated towards the center, where the darker shades of shadows could not reach. He passed by an alleyway and from the periphery of his vision, he saw a light. He stopped to study the source. At the end of the alleyway, in the second story window of a building, a light shone bright and a figure moved inside.

He looked back at the inn, at the window where Jack Patrick stayed. It, like all the other windows—save this one down the alley—was void of life. Turning back to the light, he walked down the narrow path between two buildings. The figure in the window became more defined as he approached. It was a woman. The signage of the building also became more visible; it was a saloon and whorehouse.

But the woman stood alone. She was naked. Her hair curled down between her breasts. She dipped a cloth into a basin of water and rubbed it into the folds of her skin. Her visage remained complacent, penetrating into the night, seemingly focused on and unconcerned about the voyeur

below. But the night was dark and as Matt saw her, she only saw herself in the reflection of the window.

There was a gunshot in the night. Although the sound resembled a clap of distant thunder, Matt picked out the report as his pistol discharging. A few windows along the street became alight with lamps as he ran back toward the sheriff's office. He heard muffled swearing, some arguing, then another gunshot. Through the window, the dimly-lit interior of the office flashed brilliantly for a second.

The door to the office was ajar and Matt hesitated before he swung it open. He glanced inside and pulled himself back. He studied the image burned in his mind. Then he entered.

George sat in his cell with the pistol in his hands. In her own cell, half-naked, Utah cried. Jack Patrick stood over the body of the deputy.

"The deputy, he was raping her," George said.

Matt looked to his brother and his brother nodded.

The body on the floor lay face down. His buttocks was exposed, the left lobe perforated. Another wound, a fatal shot, pooled somewhere under the body expelling blood out across the floor.

"How'd this happen?"

"You weren't here."

"The gun."

George offered the pistol to Matt, but Matt told the criminal to keep it. The chamber was empty anyhow and the sheriff would be coming any minute yet. He began to pat down the corpse; and while searching the pockets he found two silver dollars.

"Too cheap to get the only whore who was awake," Matt said.

Outside a band of men with lanterns and long-barreled guns approached.

"Shut his eyes," George pled.

"No."

The door opened and a man in a black waistcoat with a badge pinned to the lapel, and pajama pants told them to put their hands in the air. Matt and Jack Patrick raised their arms above their heads. The sheriff surveyed the scene.

"What in the hell happened here?"

George set the pistol on the floor of his cell and raised his hands. "The deputy there was rapin' her," he said.

"And who the hell are you two?"

"Martin brothers. Bounty men. Walked in on your deputy puttin' it in Miss Jones here."

The sheriff looked at the corpse on the floor. The pool of blood still grew, thinning out and staining the floorboards as it went.

"Well, Martin brothers, are you aware its against our law to have a pistol on your person in this town?"

"I shot him," George said.

"I get ya just fine, cowboy," the sheriff said. "But takin' an empty gun and the blame for this one won't buy a pardon here."

Matt lowered his hands. "Don't think I care for what's bein' said here, sheriff."

The sheriff nudged the corpse with the toe of his boot. "You got your papers?"

Slowly Matt reached into his coat and withdrew the papers. The sheriff read them and set them on the desk. Jack Patrick lowered his hands. The sheriff walked, boots heavy through the blood. Reaching through the bars, he asked George for the gun. The gun exchanged hands without a word.

"How'd you get the gun?"

The caged criminal looked to the felled man, then to the bounty men—Matt, then his brother. "Deputy gave it to me," he said.

Jack Patrick looked to Utah, alone and nearly naked; her hair fell down in tatters and she stared back at him through the bars.

iv.

Faint and elusive, the sun rose behind the veil of clouds. Jack Patrick saddled the horses. Already mounted on the horse, Utah sat crooked, wincing when she shifted or when the horse jostled her just so. They waited on Matt who had been negotiating with the sheriff.

"Give me your hands," Jack Patrick said and George raised his cuffed paws. As he tied the lanyard to the chain of the manacles, Jack Patrick began to talk lowly.

"The gun," he said.

George shook his head. "Don't make a difference."

"Sheriff in there wants to hang you."

"Your brother won't let him."

"He thinks you killed the deputy."

"I did."

"But only because—"

"You didn't kill him. I'm the one who gets hanged."

He stopped tying the knot and left the straps of leather hanging loose.

George smiled. You'll get to settle down. I don't got that much farther to walk. We can both rest."

"Stop it," Utah said. Droplets of moisture streaked down her face. "Stop."

Neither man had anything to say, the one looked wearily to his woman elevated above him on the back of a beast. The other man looked to the wagon awaiting them at the edge of town, the figures inside reduced to smudged shadows, but it was surely who he thought it was.

The door to the office opened and Matt stepped out with the sheriff. The sheriff handed Matt his pistols. His breath crystallized when he said to leave. Matt nodded and saddled up.

"But what about our supplies?" Jack Patrick asked.

But Matt was already riding on, toting George behind him.

And they rode on, north out of Sheyenne, where the day broke off from the stony expanse like a lighter shade of shale. There would be a cold snap, the sheriff told them, a

heavy frost. As the lawman foretold, the skies were bleak; the winds that once romped in the wild open meadowlands bit down in short, harsh gusts. The stiffened grasses crackled under the hooves of the horses, the rolling wagon wheels and the supple flesh of George's feet.

"Won't make it a week out here without our supplies," Jack Patrick said.

Matt heard his brother, but he continued to ride, slouched in the saddle.

"How'd you get the sheriff to give you your pistols back?"

Squinting hard against the flat wash of the horizon, Matt pointed with his hand still tangled in the reins. "See that?"

Looking out to where his brother pointed, Jack Patrick saw a lone figure waiting.

"Paul."

"Yeah. I want you to ride on out to him. Then we head northwest, veering opposite of St. John."

"Why's that?"

"Got the notion there's shelter out that way."

"Rations too?"

Matt squinted harder and waved his arm and waited for Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire to wave back. When he looked to his brother, his eyes widened.

"How'd George get my gun?"

Jack Patrick studied the wagon, moving out towards the distant Indian. The woman looked back over her shoulder as she carried on.

"I came into the office and you weren't there," he said. "The deputy was rapin' Utah and I—"

"You shot him."

"I shot him in the ass."

"Yeah."

Behind Matt's horse George shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He rested his hands so the tether grew taut and the loosely tied knot bound itself tighter.

"There was only one bullet in the gun."

"I know it."

"Then George asked for the pistol and I gave it to him. ...And he had a bullet. He must've found it when—"

"And he killed the deputy."

"That's right."

Matt looked back over his shoulder at his bound captive shivering where he stood. "Head northwest," he

instructed his brother. "There'll be shelter in a shallow, near a woods, if what I hear is true."

VII.

i.

From the swell of the upper lip of the slough Jack Patrick looked down upon the shelter Matt sent him to find. For miles, out to either side, ahead of him, there was no one. He knew the remainder of his party would arrive in due time. A swift kick of the boot and the horse began down the grade to the house. Against the gray of the skies and the muted tones of the plains, the whitewash of the home blazed. Unlit windows, deep in contrast to the white exterior, brooded as the sockets of an eyeless monster.

"Whoa," Jack Patrick said and pulled the horse's reins. He dismounted and hitched the beast to the railing of the porch.

His footsteps clopped on the floor.

"Hello," he called.

The horse snorted, shook its mane.

He tried the door and it opened without sound. Again he bayed hello and this time it resounded in the cavern of the home. Save a few pieces of furniture—chairs with woven

rope seats, a cupboard and a table in the kitchen—the house was empty. He climbed the stairs to the second floor. One of the doors to a bedroom was open. Curtains of cheesecloth filtered light into the room, fluttering from the window's draft. In the corner, a bed wide enough for two people lay covered in rumpled sheets. They were not the only tenant dwellers to have stayed in this place.

Jack Patrick parted the curtains and he saw far out the otiose vessels of his posse, Marie and her children and the Indian.

When he rode out to meet them, he would describe the house as an island kingdom.

When Utah said it looked as if someone—ghosts—lived here before them, Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire responded someone had. The children complained of hunger and the cold foretold by the sheriff came on as promised.

"Build a fire; we can sleep together for warmth, you, the children and I," Jack Patrick said.

"They're hungry too," Marie said.

Emaciated and ivoryed, the children huddled together.

Jack Patrick turned to his brother. "They're hungry."

"I know," Matt said. He opened his jacket and took out his pistol, holding it as if his hands were clasped around it in prayer. Only the ratcheting of the chamber, a series of clicks like footsteps echoed in the room.

"Matt?"

He did not look up from his gun; the clicking slowed and stopped.

"You're staying here."

Across the room, behind the children, the man and woman stood silently, their breath as clouds of vapor escaping their open mouths.

"Thought we'd be ridin' on... "

"Paul and I will, but you and I know you're stayin' here. You and Marie." He looked at the children, numb to everything. "Them too."

Marie's hand crept into Jack Patrick's own, her fingers cold, but the fleshier palm warm, a cold sting where the metal of her wedding band touched his skin.

"But—"

"This is yours," Matt said. He still focused on his gun. Jack Patrick looked about the house. It was dark and he again asked for Marie to build a fire in the hearth. Her

voice sounded hollow and small when she said again the children were hungry.

Matt bowed his head and thumbed back the hammer on his pistol.

"Forgive me," he said and opened the front door. Through the uneven glass the family witnessed the distorted figure of Matt plant the muzzle of the pistol between the eyes of Utah's horse. There was a short, hard pack. And as the gunshot echoed, the horse fell.

Horse meat, thick with muscle, tasted like dried bread. And though it only toughened as it roasted, the vassals of the house ate it until their hunger subsided. Only Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire did not eat. Outside the night grew dark beyond the depth of shadows, enclosing its inhabitants in a cave of frost and forcing them to wander its twisted bowels until the daylight aperture appeared as a distant spot burnt on the horizon.

Inside the house the fire made from fresh logs laid on a bed of crumbled coals, flared on, vanquishing the frost in the air. The children, Marie slept soundly beneath a quilt. Footsteps, patient and deliberate, signaled Matt's coming. He stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the light

ruminating from the adjoining room. He ate a strip of horse flesh.

"George and Utah down for the night?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Yeah. I chained them to the headboard upstairs—the one in the big bedroom."

"Utah know you shot her horse?"

"Told her after she had some to eat."

Jack Patrick shook his head slowly. The woman propped against his body shifted, murmured incoherently in her sleep. Except for the fire, it became quiet.

"What'd you do to get us out of Sheyenne?" Jack Patrick asked.

Matt pulled off another string of flesh with his teeth. He chewed it; wadding it into his cheek. Though it was roasted, the meat itself was bloody.

"I made him a deal."

"You takin' George and Utah back there to Sheyenne instead of St. John?"

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"The deal then."

Swallowing hard and licking the juices from his lips, Matt opened his mouth to speak. No words came out.

"The deal..."

"After I take them to St. John and they're hanged, they got to go back to Sheyenne."

Dying flames from the fire threw wild shadows on the walls of the barren room. Although the brothers sat still and the woman and children slept, their projections moved on in ceaseless motion.

"I don't understand," Jack Patrick finally said.

"The sheriff, he wants their bodies when St. John is done with 'em. Plans on stringin' up the corpses. Make an example out of 'em."

"You got to ride the bodies back down here then."

"I'll put them on a train as cargo. ...It'll be winter; their bodies'll keep."

"And the sheriff let us leave."

"Half of us," Matt said.

"What's that mean?"

Matt sighed. "Sheriff wanted to know whose authority we were under. I told him to telegram Lex in Aurora."

"He vouched for us, didn't he?"

Matt shook his head. "Lex was killed near a week ago. Gunned down."

"Vulmer did it, you know."

"Yeah," Matt said. "I know it. —But Vulmer's the new sheriff now and he gave the sheriff in Sheyenne some instructions."

"That's why you're moving on without me."

"Said we was thick as a couple of thieves. Told the sheriff to let us go, but to make certain we'd have to go our separate ways."

"Matt—" Jack Patrick began.

"Nothing that wasn't already gonna happen," Matt said. "Been going our own damned ways for a while now." They were quiet for a moment before Matt spoke again. "I told him you'd be stayin' here and he sent us away without our supplies. He wanted to make certain you'd be returning."

"Because of what I did."

Matt ate the last of the flesh and licked his fingers. With his tongue he maneuvered the meat into his cheek.

"No," he said. "George is the one who has to come back for what you did."

ii.

Morning appeared as a lighter shade of gray. And though the house had been warmed some by the fire and the movement of its inhabitants within, the lodgers' breath

still clouded in the air. The woman criminal dressed her lover's feet, wrapping them in rags from her skirt. Both she and her man remained shackled to their bedpost.

The brothers stepped out to the porch where the air was much colder.

"You ain't comin' back," Jack Patrick said.

"Don't suppose I'll be able to," Matt said. Then he said he wasn't certain if he'd be wanted back here, every place they'd been they couldn't go back to. Jack Patrick said nothing. Squinting into the wind, Matt looked out over the plains. "You'll need paid," he said. He took out his wallet and took out all of the paper money.

"Don't think I can take it," Jack Patrick said.

"It's your share."

"I didn't do half of the bounty huntin'."

"You were around to witness it."

A long sigh manifested itself as a plume of fog from Jack Patrick's mouth. He took the bills from his brother, pocketing them in his coat.

Matt opened the saddlebag of the slain horse, and took two colt pistols out. "These too."

"George's pistols. The Ladykillers."

"You'll need a gun other than the rifle. You're close to a town."

"Yeah."

"Can't carry them into town though."

"Think I know that."

The brothers looked out over the plains to where Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire wandered the embankment of the slough.

"You'll tire of her."

Jack Patrick broke his gaze off from the distant figure. "No," he said. "I won't."

"You will."

"You might settle on someone yourself."

"Probably not. Probably keep on goin'—"

"If you're lookin' for a woman—"

"I'm not. But I'm near certain there'll be that."

"That what?"

"The desire to know a body other than my own."

Jack Patrick began to ask another question, but stopped short.

"I better get on," Matt said.

And when the bounty party departed, Jack Patrick went to the master bedroom to watch them vanish, swallowed by

the tumultuous tides of grasses. Parting the sheer fabric of the curtains once they were out of sight did nothing to restore the figures. He slumped to the floor, and spied a hatbox under the bed. He stashed his pistols there.

"When are we stopping?" George asked.

His lady heaved a sigh of agreement. At the breaking point between dusk and dark, the trio still wandered on, searching without sight for the Indian leading them ever farther towards the fate of St. John. The faint formations of land and the expanse stretched out tight over it, the horizon, condensed and washed together.

"We don't stop," Matt said. "Not until we arrive where we can rest."

VIII.

i.

St. John was a small town in the county of Roulette. Most of the inhabitants of St. John were of German descent and were brought out to the nether plains by the train. Without the train the town would cease to exist. Its constant chugging in and out of the town produced life. The

dry goods sold at the store, telegrams, mail and livestock all came to the border country by way of rail.

And though the train had brought life to the north of the Dakotas, it also brought with it a stampeding of subtle changes. The staleness of the bread from the grain states became of no consequence to the families of St. John, even after they had for so long made their own bread out of the wild summer wheat. The fashions of the ladies, impractical as they were in the winter, were said to be from the East, and therefore better. The horses when they arrived, crated in boxcars, half-starved and reeking of dung, were said to be the great breeds better for farming, and they were sold fast at high prices.

More strange and concerning to the citizens of St. John, was the violence the train brought with it. The mayor regularly received telegrams of the violence in the east. The world itself was full of news of the like: falling dictators and revolutions. It all seemed to stem from the train. A conductor aboard the train had been slain a few months before. His replacement came also from the east and he was an amiable man. When he came through St. John he'd tell stories of the mountains on either side of the plains, of the horned beasts and desert lands. He was also killed

when another man shot him and stuffed his body into the coal furnace of the train. Only the bones and the brass buttons of his overalls survived the fire. No one saw who did it, but rumor had it a roving band of outlaw brothers was responsible for the crime.

So it was no surprise when a posse was spotted outside of town, the mayor sent the deputies out to see who it was. The deputies rode in two groups, flanking either side of the posse. They kept their guns drawn, locked and cocked.

"Who goes there?" the deputy in front called. He held his gun vertical in the air.

"Name's Matt Martin," the man called back. His coat was swept back behind the butts of his pistols.

"Martin brothers?"

"That's right. You the sheriff?"

"No. Deputy Escher."

Matt turned to the other flank of men. "Any of you all the sheriff?"

"Don't got one," Deputy Escher said. He dismounted and so did Matt. The Indian and the woman stayed saddled.

"This here your brother?"

Matt looked to his prisoner. "No. That's Raucous George."

The guns all shifted and pointed at George.

The deputy studied the criminal. He was heavy and worn. His feet were clad in rags and the exposed skin hues a bluish tint with patches of blackened scabs. The stoic mulatto woman sat erect on the horse next to him.

"And this here is Miss Utah Jones."

The deputies trained their guns on her chest and tipped their hats with their free hands. The Indian watched silently as Matt shook hands with the deputy and asked if he could see the mayor. And when that was done and the bounty was promised, the fate of the criminals decided and a cold wind flapped in the jackets of the lawmen and the rags of the unjust, the Indian rode off south without noise or fire; he rode on into a bleak gray sky and never ending grasses.

ii.

Mayor Roar was a man elected more for his age than any capacity to govern, for St. John was a self-governing body. It was widely known that he would abdicate his position to his only possible heir, his nephew Rolfo. Elections were a formality.

After George and Utah were locked away in the jailhouse and put under guard, Matt went to meet with the mayor.

The mayor's house was a small, quaint establishment at the head of the street. All who entered St. John had to stop at the porch of the mayor's house. The inside was bare wood, two stories with the bedroom upstairs. The bottom floor consisted of two rooms—the sitting room and the kitchen.

"You must be the young man who brought in those outlaws," the mayor said when Matt arrived.

Matt nodded.

"You don't look so young though; being on the trail with bandits can weary a man I suppose. Care for a drink?"

"Yeah," Matt said. 'Whatever you're having."

"I'm a whiskey man myself. Don't care much for the grog of the hall on the street."

The mayor decanted the liquor into two glasses and handed one of them to Matt.

"Staying for the executions tomorrow?"

Matt sipped the whiskey and it was sweet, not like the hardened alcohols in the towns he passed through. He nodded. "Heard you don't got a sheriff."

Mayor Roar chuckled. "That's right. He never showed up for the job. We had wired down and got ourselves a U.S. Marshall. Being a border town, we can ask for that you know."

"No, I didn't."

"Well, you can and we did. Only he never showed. A fellow named Heath Michaels."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Gave him a hundred dollar advance too. Enough to get him and his family moved here."

Matt brought the glass to his lips again and drank.

"You put a bounty out on him?"

"Don't want to bother with it. We have a hard enough time getting the boys around here to volunteer as deputies, let alone go out chasin' down a no-show sheriff. —He'd still be welcome here anyways. I'm not a vengeful man."

The last of the whiskey drained from Matt's glass into his mouth and he swished it around his teeth and swallowed. He stood and walked to the window. He looked to the bar on the street. "But you need a sheriff now?"

Again the mayor laughed. "Why? Think you'd be interested?"

"Yeah," Matt said. "I might be."

The hangings the next morning was a major spectacle for the town. It was the first event of its kind for the people of St. John. A crowd of onlookers gathered around the makeshift gallows—erected out of leftover floorboards from the newly-constructed chapel. Hoods bagged the faces of the two doomed criminals. Their hands were bound in front of them. Another length of rope stretched from around their necks to the crossbeam above. Their feet too, naked and raw upon the planks, were tied together. The crowd murmured as the mayor read the litany of crimes.

“Rape, horse theft,” he bellowed. “Perjury whilst under oath....”

Matt watched from far back in the crowd; he sat on his horse so he could see above the heads of the spectators. And he listened to the mayor say George and Utah shot a lawman. He pinched some tobacco into a rolling paper and licked the edge.

George grunted and his belly shook so everyone knew he was laughing. The mayor read faster and when he was finished, the preacher added that God may have mercy on their souls.

With his free hand, Matt cupped the flame of a struck match. He bowed his head so the brim of his hat also broke the wind. The trapdoors breached, the slack whipped out of the rope and hush.

When he turned to ride away, the crowd was stirring: crying and praying, some fainting and others sickened before the dead.

Part III.

I.

i.

The position of sheriff was not immediately rewarded to Matt. He took a position as a deputy. Normally, a day as a deputy consisted of walking the main street of St. John and helping damsels mount their steeds and their load wagons. Occasionally, there was a fight to break up in the meeting hall, but it rarely went beyond a couple of broken glasses and an overturned table. Rumors, as Matt heard them, stated he was a shootist, an out-of-work gunfighter, born too late for the war. He did nothing to discourage such talk.

Running to catch up with Matt while he walked his beat as deputy, caused Mayor Roar to be short of breath. He began to speak, but panted, and pulling Matt by the sleeve to a stop, they stood in the center of the dirt lane.

"Deputy Martin," the mayor said.

"Mayor."

"I've heard some rumors about you."

Matt stopped walking and faced the mayor.

"You come to talk about rumors?"

The mayor's breathing steadied and he shook his head.

"No, not rumors."

Matt stood over the old man. He didn't talk.

"I have a preposition for you."

"That so?"

"It is so. From everything I've heard—all the rumors—you might well be interested."

"Bounty work."

The waddle skin flapped when the mayor shook his head, and after another pause the mayor admitted it was indeed bounty work of a kind.

"Only you won't have to hunt the fella down; he'll come this way."

"Not much of a hunt. Why do need a man like me?"

"Townsfolk say you're a man of the gun."

"A man of the gun?"

"A gunslinger."

"Slinger."

"A shootist.... You been in a showdown or two."

"Showdown."

"That's what I've been told."

"Oh."

The men ambled a few more steps to the burm of the lane, then stopped.

"The men will come here?"

"Yes," the mayor said. "That's right."

"Do we know when?"

"Should be about three days now."

"You know this for certain."

"Yes."

"How?"

Mayor Roar grinned. "Are you familiar with the telegraph?"

"I am."

"The telegraph came out his way with the rail lines. Can't have one without the other I suppose. Well, I began to wire the surrounding towns, sending telegrams out to the other mayors. Soon we began to update each other on the crimes of our towns, robberies and the like. Come to find out there's a family of thieves who ride a circuit through the border country. They always rob Harrisboro four days before coming this way. ...Harrisboro was robbed yesterday."

"You said this is a family."

"That's right. A man and wife, their son."

"Son's how old?"

"Old enough to rob and steal."

The men paused their conversation to tip their hats to a passing woman. The mayor called her by name.

"They're mean too, his parents are. Half the reason I don't have a sheriff."

Matt watched the woman walk away. He spoke without looking at the mayor.

"You want them gone—dead."

The mayor rubbed the beard on his chin and smiled.

"I was thinking you'd make a good sheriff, Mr. Martin."

ii.

None of the men in the meeting hall mentioned the possible marauding. Instead, the men told stories of men other than themselves. They told of cousins in the east who made it rich, of their uncles who fought in the war, who settled out farther west and found gold. Matt recognized the livery owner sitting by himself at a table and sat with him.

"Ever told you 'bout my wife's sister, Clara?" the livery owner asked.

"Yeah, the one who made it off better than the likes of us," Matt said. Before the livery owner could ask another question Matt asked if he knew anything of the robberies committed by the outlaw family.

"The Rascals."

"That their name?"

"That's what we call 'em round here. Don't know their Christian names. There's Big Rascal, Lady Rascal an'—"

"Little Rascal."

"Runt."

"Runt. Fine. What do they usually do?"

The livery owner hiccupped and referred Matt to the barkeep. "They rob this hall every time," he said. "Old Roy keeps a shotgun under the bar there, but can't never get to use it."

"How's that?"

"They send in a different family member every time. The boy, Runt, he grows up so damn fast you can't count on recognizin' him."

Matt said that kids have a way of doing that.

"Figure you'll square off with 'em one of these days?"

"Just heard about them, wanted to know more."

The livery owner leaned back in his chair and called over his shoulder to the barkeep.

"Ol' Roy," he said. "Tell the out-of-towner here about the Rascal Family."

The bartender who had been wiping down the counter, stopped his cleaning and said there wasn't much to say. "They rob me every time. I got the liquor, so I must have the money too."

With this statement of fact some of the more seasoned patrons raised their glasses to the keep.

"The second time the old man drifted in here I recognized him all right."

"You didn't shoot?"

"No." The barkeep began to wipe down the counter again. "Heard he was a bit of a pistoleer."

"Pistoleer."

"A gunfighter."

"I know."

"Just easier to give him the money."

Matt looked deep into his glass of grog. "Well, you are the only game in town."

The keep laughed, saying he was as much as Mayor Roar let him be.

Both men laughed full, hearty, under the pretense of drunkenness. Then Matt asked if there were any ladies in the establishment.

The other men looked to their lawman and one responded that whores bred sin; no, they didn't have whores in St. John.

Matt went in search of a whore anyway. He looked in the usual places, the side streets, lantern-lit sheds, houses with the curtains slightly parted. But no women could be found, none willing to lay with him for the night. At the end of the main street, he paused to look for a light, but no light could be found.

He returned to his rented room beside the saloon—the saloon had since closed. The glass interred flame by his bedside burnt low and orange. As the night passed and the kerosene wicked and burnt, Matt practiced shooting himself in the mirror.

iii.

Daddy Rascal rode as the chosen of his clan. He rode into town on a calico horse with spots causing observers to believe the otherwise white horse was splattered with mud.

A stocky man, he rode crimped up with the reins pulled in close to his body. He and his horse lunged through the main street of the town as one.

Matt sat at the end of the counter, nearest the door in the saloon. A deputy he stationed outside the door nodded. The time had come. Casually, the barkeep stepped back to his stockroom. A few men—old timers—stayed at their tables. One said he'd seen a gunfight or two, none like this one here though.

The guns carried heavily in their holsters. Matt reached under his long jacket to where the weapons were sheathed. His hand wrapped around the butt of one of the guns. His thumb pressed against the hammer.

Then Matt stood and walked out the door of the hall to the street, where the town's visitor sat on his steed, a carbine laying across his lap. Matt's hand unwrapped from the gun and fell harmlessly to his side. He looked up at Daddy Rascal, tilting his head to block the sun. The bandit fiddled with the reins and muttered to himself. Locks of gray hair swirled out from under his flap leather hat. When he finished meddling with the reins, he looked to the man standing before him.

"Here to rob this tavern," he said. He blinked, batting his long gray lashes as he spoke.

Across the street a small gathering of men watched Matt's reaction. But the cowboy stood, unmoving. Daddy Rascal sighed and pumped the stock of his carbine once.

"You ain't gonna cause yerself no trouble is ya? ...I aim to just take the money."

Subtlety shifting his weight from one leg to the next, Matt continued to stare.

The bandit loosened one foot from his stirrup and began leaning to one side, ready to dismount. Whipping his jacket back and jerking out the pistol, Matt fired once. And again. The man fell, his other leg still tethered to the saddle.

Across the street, already the chatter and reenactment began. Without word, Matt holstered the still smoking pistol; he stroked the muzzle of the horse to calm him. Then he secured the bandit's leg in the stirrup and slapped the horse hard on the haunches. And the horse galloped back out of town, dragging the body of the newly dead. A close observer heard Matt say the body would eventually find the other lost wretches.

Word of Matt's promotion made its way south, transmitting along the railroad tracks and telegram wires to the mouths of gossips and people who know people, as news does. And when he heard of Matt's good fortune, Jack Patrick sighed and said simply it was what he deserved.

iv.

"Sheriff," Mayor Roar said. He opened the door to his home the rest of the way and ushered his visitor inside.

"Come in."

Matt entered, taking off his hat and tapping the dust of snow off his boots.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" the mayor asked.

"Come here about the town."

"Business."

"Yes."

"Naturally."

The mayor ambled back across the living room and opened a credenza. Without asking, he took out a bottle of sherry and poured two glasses.

"Well come on," he said and sat in the great room. Matt followed the mayor and they sat opposite one another in cushioned chairs.

"Need a hot totty in weather like this," Mayor Roar said. "It'll turn, get real cold, soon."

"I've heard it said."

Heads of animals were mounted on the walls, some with horns, others were just heads, rotund and woolen. Glass bead eyes stared down blankly on the two men. Across the room, beyond a dropped rafter, the kitchen lay barren, except for a rattling pot of coffee on the stove.

"I stay up late," the mayor said. He too looked to where Matt was entranced. "Find as I get older I do more at night, sleep less than I used to. That's why I like this house so much. It sets out here at the edge of town, not packed in there with the rest of 'em. I worry that the town will continue to grow and swallow up my solitude."

Matt nodded.

"But you came here to talk about the town, not my private musings." In a gesture of a toast, the mayor raised his glass and took a sip of the sherry.

Matt spoke. "I've ridden across most the plains now, rode from out west before that."

"Yes, I've heard."

The coffee pot rattled some more. Fumes of fresh coffee filled the air.

"I know how men work."

The mayor drank again. He chuckled. "Are you angling for my job, sheriff? ...I know how men work, too. You sound like you're campaigning for governor."

"I know how the evil men work."

"Oh, I see."

"I can hunt down these men you want killed. I can ride out of town to pursue—"

"I'd never ask you—"

"I've spent a lot of time hunting bounties, ending them. I don't mind doin' it."

Another pronounced silence came over both of the men. Their drinks ran low and the mayor made mention of the coffee on the stove again.

"I've got enough to spare," he said.

Matt nodded and the mayor rose from his seat and went to the kitchen. He raised his voice as his back was to Matt.

"I put some chocolate in mine," he said. "You ever had chocolate, Matt?"

"No."

"Well, I only got two squares left from the last box that came in on the train. Looks to work out just right."

Mayor Roar walked slowly, careful not spill the coffee. He handed the mug to Matt and gave him a small dark square of the candy.

"I usually stir it into my coffee, let it melt in there."

The mayor settled back down into his chair and did as he told Matt to do, and stirred his coffee with the chocolate.

"I picked you based on your record, Matt."

Sweetness wafted in the air with the bitterness of the coffee.

"The town needs a strong man for the law, someone without quibbles over the spirit of the law, a man who can read the letter of the law."

"You wanted a man without qualms."

"Yes, that's right."

They both cradled their hands around their mugs, absorbing the heat within and warming the flesh of their palms.

"Those men I rode with are attracted to the night."

"...Most of the crime does happen at night."

"They'd ride in the night, trying to find a common place, and they'd be drawn to the saloons."

Sitting upright and with a single nod, the mayor said he agreed and that was why he closed all but one of the town's saloons and set a curfew on the streets for midnight.

"Have the main clock in the meeting hall set to chime at twelve every night."

"If there's no place for the evil men to go, they just wander in the darkness."

"Better out there than in here."

The mayor drank from his mug and winced as the brew was still too hot.

"I'd like to cage them," Matt said. "Like animals."

"Can't lock up the whole territory now."

The coffee steam thinned and Matt sipped at the beverage.

"I don't want to lock them up, mayor. Let them roam, come to light on their own accord."

"You want a church?" "I'd rather have a saloon."

"We already got one."

"No. One with whores."

A respective silence echoed in the room. Each man drank from his own cup. Outside the midnight bell chimed. It too echoed.

"I can't say I agree, Matthew."

"It gives me a place where I can look for crime."

"It might attract crime."

"It's like a church."

"A church is built for converts."

"Converts say they already knew God."

"And those who frequent these houses of evil?"

Bits of grounds floated in Matt's drink. He swished them around. Then he drank the mixture and it made his voice husky. His lips shrunk tight together and long across his face.

"Those men already knew evil."

A number of weeks later a saloon opened up out behind the general store in a shed. The shed proved to be an ideal structure for the saloon. The walls were planked wood over sod and the building held the heat produced within. Windows were squat oblong openings covered in waxed paper. The door was also squat, almost square in stature. The bartender was the son of the gentleman-owner of the general store.

Patrons naturally came to the saloon after spending the former half of the evening in the meeting hall. The saloon, its seclusion, provided a confidence in the old

acquaintances, and they swore and talked of lusts they had in their younger years. They drank pale ales and only ceased when the bells chimed midnight. Only then did they extinguish the lamplight and sneak home through the shadows to their families.

As part of his duty as sheriff, Matt followed the men from the meeting hall to the saloon. No new patrons came to the establishment, only the same old timers and working men. Contrary to Matt's prediction, no new brand of injustice happened into the town. In time it became custom for Matt to be the last to leave the saloon, locking the door fast behind himself. He'd pull his long coat tight around his body, and gravitated—as most of the men did—to the leeward side of the alleyway, where the shadows clung in narrow blocks of blackness to their building counterparts. Somewhere in the abyss a man called him by name. Matt ignored the calling. But again the man said his name, and again Matt ignored the call.

"Matt Martin," the voice said a third time.

A tug on his sleeve pulled Matt to a stop.

"Mayor Roar."

The old statesman was bundled in furs, a round-domed cap pulled down hard, meeting the tips of his ears.

"I called to you twice here—"

"Thought I might be hearin' things."

The mayor nodded. He breathed smoke. "Being out in the night can do that to a man's mind."

"Yeah."

"It's not too late for you to talk?" "No."

"I wouldn't think so; I'm up late myself most nights. When I look out my window, your light is usually on over at the inn."

"That so?"

"It is." The mayor shivered and asked if Matt cared to talk elsewhere.

"Your house?"

"No," the mayor shook his head so his beard combed through the fur wrapped about his neck. "How about the saloon," he suggested.

Matt nodded and they retreated back down the alleyway, walking the path laid out in the shadows. Upon reaching the door of the bar, he unwrapped his coat and withdrew the key. He unlocked the door. And when both he and the mayor were inside, he used a match to light the lamp on the counter.

"There's a chill in here without so many men," Matt said.

"It'll warm here soon." The mayor loosed the shawl of his furs. "Keep the lamplight low. I don't care to draw any curious souls."

Matt did as the mayor instructed and trimmed the wick to a dim flicker. The old man ambled around the bar to where the bartender normally stood.

"Still some coals in the fireplace over here."

"None enough for me to worry about."

"I know." Mayor Roar used a nearby knife to stoke the coals. Then he added sticks to the kindling. "Your saloon isn't attracting any new sinners, Matt."

The lawman sat silently in the corner.

"It's a fact," the mayor continued, "that I've had to address some very concerned young wives of upstanding men."

As he spoke the mayor inventoried the bottles on the shelved wall, and when he found one suiting his needs, he uncorked it and poured the contents into a pan on the counter. He took a metal ball from the pocket of his coat. The ball was hollow and had slits cut into it. The mayor suspended the object into the pan by a small chain. He

reached back into his coat and added some liquid from his own flask.

"It seems as if your saloon is only good for destroying good."

"Need more than some bottles in a backhouse."

The mayor stirred the brew in the pan. Its fumes began to fill the small space and it was a sweet mixture.

"What are you makin'?"

The mayor turned his head to Matt so his white beard glowed orange in the radiance of the fire.

Matt diverted his eyes. "...Men aren't attracted by bottles of whiskey. The town's always had whiskey. We need something else to attract—"

"Attract?" the mayor interrupted. "Wasn't killing Daddy Rascal enough to stop these other men from coming here? Why would we—"

"What do you propose we do?"

The mayor turned back to the pan on the fire and removed it from the flames. He poured it into two stoneware cups.

"Drink this," he said. "It'll put a fire inside you."

Matt tipped the cup toward his lips and inhaled deeply. The aroma caused him to snort. Setting the cup back

down, he breathed through his mouth. Then he drank from the cup. An unknown interval of time passed and the mayor repeated his question.

Matt shook his head.

"Are you ill?"

"No," Matt said. He gasped and pushed the cup away, across the counter ledge. "We should have whores."

"Whores?"

"Yeah. Whores bring out the worst in men."

"I take it you're speaking from your own run-ins with these... ladies."

Matt rubbed his eyes and shook his head again. "I... I been in a place where there's been whores. That's where the outlaws go."

"And you want to attract the outlaws?"

"So they could get justice. ...What'd you have me do?"

The mayor raised his cup and wafted the steam under his nose. "I'd like to send out men to find the outlaws." Then he drank down his entire cup.

"Bounty hunting."

He nodded.

"I suppose there's a particular evil you're wanting me to find."

II.

i.

Inside the lodge all was quiet. The man behind the desk read a dime novel. He leafed through the pages, studying the images more than the accompanying text.

As he took off his coat, Matt shook the vestment and caught the deskman's attention. Shutting the book and leaning over the counter, he put his fingers to his lips and shushed his visitor.

"I received the telegram from Mayor Roar," he said. "We've been expecting you."

Matt nodded.

"He's in Room Six, upstairs and to the right." The deskman slid a key across the countertop. "Might be sleeping now."

"Is he alone?" "Alone as you or me."

Again Matt nodded. He pulled out one of his pistols and checked the chamber. It was fully loaded. He took the key in his other hand and started up the stairway.

"Hey," the deskman called after him.

Matt turned.

"Aren't you going to go in through the window?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Isn't that how it's done?" "What?" "Isn't that how the sheriffs catch the gunslingers?"

"Gunslingers."

"Y'know, like a pistoleer, a—"

"I know."

"So aren't you gonna go in through the window?"

"...No."

"How you going to do it?"

"I'm going in through his door with the key you gave me."

"Oh. ...Well let me give you the right key then."

The deskman ascended the three steps between him and the cowboy and went back to his desk to exchange it.

"Why'd you give me the wrong key?" "Thought you'd refuse it."

"'Cause I'd go in through the window."

"Yeah."

The deskman came back to the steps and held out the key. Matt opened his mouth to say something. Instead he continued on up the stairs into the lighted hallway above.

"Hey."

The deskman had followed Matt up the stairs.

"That floorboard right there is real creaky."

"It is?"

"Yes sir."

"Thanks."

"Wouldn't step on it if I were you."

Matt thumbed back the hammer on the pistol and held the gun at the deskman's belly.

"You're making me nervous," he said. "That fella in there, in Room Six, only needs one bullet, which leaves me with five more shots. I'd rather keep them in my gun, if you don't mind."

"Oh. Well, yes. I'll go then. I'll wait downstairs. ...You will be coming back down the stairs, yes?"

Stepping on the board did make a creak and the deskman fled back down the stairs.

As Matt approached the door, he stopped. The hallway lamp hung directly across from the door. Spreading his legs wide, he straddled the girth of the threshold so his feet would cast no shadows in the gap under the door. Gently, he eased the key into the hole and turned. The lock slid out. Leaving the key in the hole, he began to turn the knob. A parting came between the jamb and the door. Inside there was darkness. Pressing his body against the wall and

lightly stepping, he proceeded into the room. Using his fingertips and clutching the firearm in the opposite hand, he shut the door. Darkness engulfed him. He waited for his blindness to pass. In time it did. He saw the setting laid out before him clearly: the sinner lay recumbent in a bed at the far end of the room. His body, while in repose, twitched, the dreams alive in his head. Murmurs and snores drifted in the darkness.

Outlines of other things—their ghostly forms—became more evident as Matt stood in the room. Once the creation was completely revealed, he began to proceed again. He crept across the room, easing pressure off one foot and onto the other. Through the window it appeared as if the stars, though covered thick with clouds, blared bright and steady. Matt avoided looking to the window as it would ruin the vision he developed in the shadows. He crept forward. He sidled next to the bed and looked down on the man as a shrivener and listened. Any prayers the man had came out as incoherent whispers.

Matt's free hand stretched out to wake the man—to separate him from the world in his head. But he did not touch the man. He recoiled and whispered, "amen." Then he shot the man through the left eye.

The flash of gunpowder and its phosphorus smoke momentarily blinded Matt. His vision quickly readjusted and he saw his work. A cauterized hole bore deep and dark into the man's head. His other eye remained shut. He had not moved and did not move now.

Matt searched his pockets and when he found a coin, he placed it on the remaining eye.

When he left the room and returned to the lamplight of the hallway, he left the door open.

ii.

When Matt returned to St. John, there were whores. Since the saloon could not accommodate the women and the men, the men searching for a woman paid the bartender and the bartender gave the customer a key to the chosen whore's room at the inn.

"Cold enough for snow now," Matt said.

"Sheriff," the bartender nodded. He poured the lawman a glass of liquor. "This should warm you up."

"Any new sorts come by?" "Just the usual. ...The day before yesterday we had a few men riding the train—some rail officials—stop in."

"That so?"

"Spent nearly three dollars in the hour they were here."

"That's a lot of drinks."

The bartender looked to the other patrons in the saloon, but they paid no attention; they spoke amongst themselves.

"They, uh, partook in the women."

"The whores."

"Yeah," the bartender nodded and began to wipe down the counter.

"Anyone else use the whores?"

"Can't say for certain."

Matt sipped at his whiskey. "Might need to find a bartender who can keep track of these things."

"It's just that—"

"This saloon exists because I made it." The other patrons ceased their conversation. "Same goes for the women and the men who buy them."

"...We've had a few regulars buy a woman. The married sorts of men mostly."

"No strangers?"

"No."

Matt stared at the bartender, but everyone else looked at their sheriff.

"How many whores were we afforded?"

"Three. Sent over from Rollo."

"Any keys left over there?"

"One."

Matt sipped his whiskey again and when the key was laid before him, he stocked off to the inn.

At the inn, Matt started down the hall, then stopped. He turned to where the lamp sat on a shelf. He turned the knob and the flame lessened and extinguished. The hall became a tunnel of darkness. The entrance to the whore's room remained shut, only the light burning from within emanated out from under the door. The lawman walked to the threshold and touched the knob, but he thought better of it and slumped against the adjacent wall. In the hallway, he watched the blotted markers of the life form on the other side, the shadows of her feet, pass by the doorway.

From farther out, beyond the reach of the fire's flames Matt could see his bounty prey. They sat together beside the fire, a bearded man and his younger companion. Their

voices carried on the thin air of the night around them. And Matt knew from his travels through the darkness they could not see him approach; their senses were blunted by the fattening of the flames. He checked his pistols. Each gun remained warm and ready—nearly living—beneath the flanks of his long jacket.

He rode up to the fire.

It wasn't until he drew closer, within the ebb of the fire's glow, that he became a visible thing to the men.

"Evening."

"What you say stranger?"

"Said evening."

"Little past eve, ain't it?" the other said.

"Been ridin'?"

"Looking for a light."

The fourth voice came aloof through the darkness from an unnoticed source.

Then Matt saw him: a hooded man—a negro—sitting on his haunches.

"Looking for a place to come. To stop and rest," one of the men said.

Matt nodded and said it was right.

"Well, sit down then," the man with beard said and Matt dismounted and sat on the ground.

Heat radiated out in waves and warmed Matt's face. A bottle passed from one hand to another and each took his swig, save the negro.

"Not too many men in this part of the country."

"Gettin' cold too."

"I reckon everyone's headin' somewheres."

"Yeah."

"How about you? You headin' somewheres?"

"Lookin' for my work."

"What line of work you in, stranger?" "Missions."

The younger man laughed and said their guest didn't look like much of a missionary. Somewhere in the periphery of night, the negro's eyes gleamed and flecks of light refracted off his teeth. Laughter chortled deep in his throat. And they all drank some more.

"What about you fellas?" Matt asked. His voice had lowered with the brusque of hard liquor.

The men ceased chuckling.

"We're headin' south. -Looking for work."

"That so."

"Yeah.... Winter up this way is hard."

"Like hell," his companion agreed.

Another slurp from the bottle and Matt nodded.

"Ever been out Rolette way?"

Air pockets in the log fueling the fire popped, causing all the men to jolt. Sparks ejected and fluttered up, dissipating in the cosmos above.

"Can't say we have."

"Why you ask?" "Just curious."

"You from up that way?"

"Me? No."

They all sat in a prolonged silence, even the hissing of the resin in the logs hushed into a mute.

Then Matt said, "Up."

"What's that?" "You said up."

In the lighted darkness, the bearded man's facial hair glowed and the shadows of his eye sockets, the ruts in his face, grew deeper.

"What are you?" he asked.

Matt chuckled and stopped when he realized his laughter was mimicked by the negro.

"Let me get us another bottle," the younger man said.

As he clamored to his feet, Matt told him to sit down.

"But I was—"

Again Matt told the man to sit and the man sat.

Slowly, Matt slid his hand down and inside his long jacket. He withdrew one of his pistols. He did not point it at any of the men and they sat dumb and inert in front of the bounty man.

"You gonna take—"

"You all know what atonement is?" "Can't say I do."

"Me neither."

The negro sat in the darkness. He blinked and reopened his eyes. Fire reflected film of liquid covering his eyes.

Matt casually turned the gun toward them.

"What'd you fellas do to get a bounty on your head?"

"...They say we killed a whore."

"Was the negro involved?" "He's just our guide."

"Got him last week."

Shielding his own vision with his hand, Matt looked into the night at the negro and told the spectator he should probably go, he wouldn't want to get caught riding with these animals. But the man smiled and remained seated.

"You want money?" the younger man offered.

"No."

"What's atonement then?" Matt stood and emptied the chambers of his gun. He loaded one bullet back into the chamber and set the firearm before his captives.

"Shoot him."

Matt nodded from the old man to the gun to the old man's companion.

"Shoot him," he said again.

The companion began to scuttle backwards with his hands and heels.

"Hold up there," Matt said. He pulled out his second pistol and trained it on the man. Then he turned to the old man.

"Go ahead now, shoot."

Deep into where the old man's sockets were, liquid glimmered and fell down in slow trails, seeping into the lines formed by age.

"Shoot."

The old man sniffed and nodded at his companion.

"Don't," the younger pleaded.

The negro bellowed with laughter.

The old man grasped the pistol firmly and jammed the barrel up underneath his chin. He depressed the trigger. There was a muted click. And the laughter became heartier.

He pressed the trigger a second time and it clicked a second time.

"Give me that."

Matt stood up and kicked the old man, snatching the gun from him in a single action. He handed it to the younger man.

"It's your turn."

In his hands the gun was gripped firmly. He pointed it at the old man and pulled the trigger. A hard, flat pop and a flash filled the immediate night. The old man's body jerked over sideways, his neck angling to one side. He sprawled out in the grass and, staring into the cosmos, blinked twice. Blood, tarry and thick, gurgled out of his neck. Little bubbles formed in the liquid, but did not break. A sloshing sound resounded deep in his throat. His hands grappled at nothing. Then he died.

Turning again to the younger man, Matt told him to stand. The younger stood, swaying, not taking his eyes off the corpse.

"Can't ya shut his eyes?"

"Don't worry about him. Turn around."

Like a man possessed by a nzambi god, the man turned, putting his hands behind his back. Matt reached around the

man's neck and cupped his hand around his chin, yanking his head upward. The man struggled and yelped. With his free hand, Matt planted the muzzle of the pistol at the base of the man's skull and fired. The exit wound exploded at the hairline of the man's forehead. Matt tried to hold the body upright, but fell on top of it on the way down. His arm was pinned beneath the combined weight of their bodies. He rolled over and wriggled his arm out from under the man. Blood covered the ground. Bits of matter clung to the leather of Matt's jacket. The negro watched.

"You better get on," Matt said. "I don't want to have to kill you too."

But the dark figure sat without movement, his eyes roving, gleaming and studying Matt's moves.

Then Matt set to work. He removed the boots from the corpses and threw them as far as he could, just as he had seen ages ago. Rummaging through their pockets he took a pocket watch, a ring and their wallets. He grabbed the old man's corpse by the feet and dragged his body onto the bed of coals. He added to the fire with a couple of logs. The fabric about the body rumpled and creased with ridges of orange, exposing the tarnishing skin beneath. Smoke grew thicker and putrid. The other body was heavier and he

dragged it facedown through the grass and laid it across the other body. It too began to burn. Once the flames were steady, and squelched out of their smothering points, Matt took the extinguished lantern and thrust it onto the fire. It exploded. Flesh burnt.

For the first time Matt could see the negro clearly. His skin shined in the firelight. His head was bald and scarred—wide smooth trails looked to be left by slithering creatures. He was naked. Matt took the pistol from his holster and held it ready. The reflection of the blaze made the instrument appear as if it had been pulled from the forges of hell. The negro neither moved nor laughed nor blinked. Matt holstered his gun.

When he rode from the pyre into the swallows of night, he turned back to look upon his destruction; but he saw only the glory of a conflagration.

iii.

"I fear," the mayor said, "that I may have given you too much work."

Matt drew on the last of his cigarette and tossed it over the railing, into the street. "We can go inside," he offered.

"No, it's all right. I should be getting on to the town hall. There's a council meeting you know."

"Didn't hear that."

"Every other week, same time."

The men stood on the planked walkway and watched the denizens of St. John mill about.

"You haven't given me too much, mayor."

Mayor Roar pulled his coat tight around his shoulder and shuddered. Flurries fell down in listless paths. Some flakes fell onto the hairs of the mayor's fur coat and remained crystalline. Other flakes fell onto the men's skin and melted.

"I underestimated the amount of outlaws," he said.

"The outlaws underestimate me."

The mayor coughed some and after catching his breath he told the lawman he should look for that cursed border agent; this was all too much for one man.

"It's an easy job."

"Maybe. Can still take a toll on a man. That border agent, Heath, is rumored to be around these parts."

A snowflake fell onto Matt's eyelashes and melted. He blinked and rubbed his eye.

"Where'd you go last night?" the mayor asked.

"Went out riding."

"Do you ever sleep?"

"Try not to, no."

Fantasy passed into the irreconcilable realm of dreams, and Matt, as he had thousands of times before, became the sole inhabitant of a graven world. This world was a dead pine wood forest. Scrag trees scattered themselves and the roots were thick and woven beneath his feet. Smoke covered the sky in a thick haze. He could see the smoke sifting through the empty branches. A bird landed at the top of a pine. In its beak, the bird clenched a coin. Matt looked for his pistols, but could not find them. A pair of sandals hung from his belt where the guns should have been. Song came from the bird as it hopped from treetop to treetop.

Matt cursed the bird in a harsh whisper; he warned the bird the others might hear. But the bird sang anyway. There were no stones to throw. In compulsion the cowboy knelt and folded his hands. He recited words he heard from a desert time. Lightning struck the fowl and lit the trees on fire. The cowboy knew the flames would consume him and ultimately send him on with the wind. It was why the sky appeared as

it did. The whole world—all of creation—must have knelt and asked for the same thing.

Then he chose to wake.

The whore he lay with readjusted in her sleep and sighed. Matt rolled over onto his back and breathed heavily. The dream had dissipated. He rolled over onto his side and wrapped his arm over the woman. Her skin was warm.

"You awake?" But she only continued breathing.

"I had a bad dream," he said. "Can't remember it though—like usual. It's easy to tell when the dreams were bad."

His hand roved over the woman's naked body and rested finally on her breast.

"Feels like there's a storm brewing," he said. "I think there's something I can do about it though."

iv.

"I have a special assignment for you," Matt told Deputy Escher.

"Sheriff?"

"I need you to go find a man."

"A bounty?"

"Not to kill."

"Bring 'em back alive?"

Matt drank coffee from a tin cup, his lips pursed after he sipped from it. "No, just find him."

"Why can't you find someone who does that, who brings back men alive?"

"You know the name: Heath Michaels."

Deputy Escher blinked once or twice and cussed under his breath. "We can get another border agent; you don't gotta go out an' find the man. If you didn't want the job—"

"That's not it." Matt looked down into his cup and sloshed the coffee until it cycloned. "Just find him."

Even though Matt wasn't looking at him, the deputy nodded.

"And don't tell anyone. You'll use my horse to leave tonight around midnight."

Because it would not present itself as suspicious, Matt met his returning deputy at the saloon. The hour was late and most of the old timers had retired for the night. A younger man left with a key for the inn.

"What'd you find out?" Matt asked.

"I found him."

"How'd you track him down?"

"Used the wire—"

"I thought I told you to—"

"I saw him. Laid eyes on him. I just used the telegraph and sent out to a few of the towns nearby."

"And you saw him?"

"Yes. ...Did you think I was goin' to ride to all the towns with the heavy snows comin' on?"

Neither man had a drink or a smoke, nothing to fidget with, nothing to occupy their idle hands. They simply looked at one another.

"And," Matt said.

"I just want to be clear on what you plan on doin' here."

Matt broke his stare and rolled his eyes before reconnecting his gaze.

"You want me to stay on as sheriff?"

"Sure."

"You do?"

"Yes."

There was a measured silence. A drunk in the corner snored; his male companion also slumbered, though less noisily.

"Why do you want me as mayor?"

"Sheriff."

"That's what I meant to say: sheriff." "...Can't say. Seems like you know what the town needs."

"That's right. A ranger from down south doesn't know what this town needs. He's like the others from the outside."

"How do you mean?"

"I've been asked by Mayor Roar to keep the outlaws out. I've done this two ways: I've hunted them down, and I've lured them here for justice."

"Heath Michaels is a ranger."

"He's an outsider. He needs to stay outside."

Again, the men stared at one another. Then Deputy Escher spoke. "He's at the boarding house, in Rollette. Shouldn't be hard to find."

Matt found the boarding house just fine. Despite the night of flurried snow, the door was left open. It was mostly silent inside; the bartender cleaned and stacked his

glasses in a pyramid behind the counter. Another man sat in the corner, cloaked in the coat of a Texas Ranger. His fingers traced around the rim of the glass before him. And as Matt made his way across the loose and squeaking floorboards, the man looked from his glass to the cowboy. The pistols beneath Matt's jacket shifted and pressed and moved with the swing of his hips. The bullets sat packed inside fat and heavy, praying for expulsion.

"Can I help you, cowboy?" the man said.

Matt had ridden through the night, leaving at sundown on a stolen horse. He rode the horse in the tundraed lands so fiercely the hooves cracked, filling with snow packed into ice, breaching the gaps ever wider. Now, with the frost beaded into dew on his jacket and his spurs thawed and jangling, he walked towards the out-of-work ranger.

"Can I help you?" the man asked again. Matt halted. "Heath?"

The man paused for a moment and moved his hand from the glass to the tabletop and slid it nearer to the edge. "Who wants to know?" he asked.

The guns flourished from beneath the long tail of Matt's coat and blazed forth.

v.

The frost woke him: the frost that sealed his mouth shut and bonded his eyelids together, and crept deep into his nostrils, into his throat and lungs. He had dreamed of children, barefoot and playing in the snow. They were emulating their father who was nowhere to be found. In his dream, Matt had called to them, telling them to put their boots on. Their feet would be too cold. Only the children kept playing as if they hadn't heard him calling. He yelled again and there was no response. Then he took out his gun and fired it into the air. The sky above broke and fell down as flecks of glass sifting with the snow. It was then the children saw him and heard his voice and bled.

Matt awoke. His horse had died. Its legs had folded under its body, and the head, with great gaping and slackened jaw, scooped out in front. Froth from the mouth of the beast had frozen it to the ground.

On the horizon a definite shadow cast deep against the gray sky and Matt knew it was St. John. There was a party riding out; three men bundled and trotting on Clydesdales.

"Sheriff Martin!" the one called. And Matt raised his hand.

The men dismounted and ran to his side.

"Dear God," the one said and unscrewed the lid to his flask. The taste of hard whiskey whet and warmed Matt's mouth.

"Come on," the other said and he heaved Matt's body over his shoulder, and Matt felt the blood course to his temples. When the woman with the sunflower scented hair would wash Matt's face, the scabs would melt and blood would flow down like tears.

The mayor paced at the foot of Matt's bed.

"The thing is, Matt, no one missed the horse. I'm not concerned about that. But you disappeared." He waited a moment, looking to Matt. But Matt looked out the window.

He continued. "That same night, west of here the man who you replaced was murdered. The bartender too. I got the telegram this morning. And then you're found fairly battered, west of town."

The sky outside the window was gray, solid with clouds and the clouds were laden with snow.

"I hate to accuse the lawman of St. John of anything. I also hate to chalk it up to coincidence."

"No," Matt said. "It's fine."

There was a measured silence as if the mayor had rehearsed these lines before actually performing them.

"Well, you've been good to us," Mayor Roar said. He propped one leg up on the footboard of the bed. "It may just be best if you leave for a while."

"What?"

"I've got a Clydesdale packed up for ya. Got a little bivy tent on there too. I'm making you a border agent."

"Hm."

"Just for a while, until this all blows over."

Mayor Roar took out a clip of money and laid it at the foot of the bed. "This is your advance. You'll need to be gone by tonight." He walked to the door of the bedroom.

"What does a border agent do, sir?" Matt asked.

"Just patrols the border up north. Makes sure no one crosses the line, and if they do, make certain they are good men."

III.

i.

Outside St. John, nearer to the border and just past, midnight glowed as a golden furnace, the lights of hamlets and towns reflecting between the snow and sky. Matt trudged

on, well past the boundary line, to where the wintry flames dissipated and shrank into specks of concentrated light smattered across the great opaque.

And the north border country was picketed with pines and drenched in the mantle of winter. Matt led his Clydesdale by the bridle. He trudged with the skins of animals wrapped around his legs and feet. Behind him the horse plodded mutely in the vast white. The sky above was blank as if mirroring the world below. Only the columns of tree trunks and the low hanging uncovered boughs betrayed the world in between. The trees grew thicker and cut the wind. It was there, in the pine forest at the border, that Matt spent his first night.

The bivy tent unfurled and it was much smaller than he expected. He used his teeth and gloved hand to open his pocketknife. The blade stuck to his lip and pulled the soft flesh open. The blood froze within seconds. He cut the tent tarp seams so it became a large flat sheet, and he hung this as a wind break from a bough. Taking the bridle, he led the Clydesdale to the leeward side and lashed the reins around a tree.

The low hanging uncovered boughs of pine were prime for firewood. They snapped easily in cold, the sap frozen

inside. Matt took the branches to a hole he had dug in the snow not too far from his horse. He again took off his glove to strike a match. Instantly, the cold paralyzed his hand and it turned ivory and patched with blue. The tiny flame held no heat in itself; it needed fuel. And the pile of dried pine needles only smoldered and the match scorched itself out.

Silent swearing broke the communion of the nature. The sulphurous incense of smolder hung stagnant in the air behind the windbreak. Matt slogged to the Clydesdale and looked through the saddlebags. Anything able to be torched would do. He pulled out a small book. It was a book of bounty papers the mayor packed for him. He leafed through the first five pages and memorized the faces, sounded out the names. Then he tore the papers out and used them to kindle his fire.

Isolation was a familiar thing to Matt. He did not feel secluded from the world in the northern woods. He adapted to the cold and the winter that fell complete and deep and unrelenting. He and the Clydesdale rode in the rows formed in the pine forests. When they stopped for the night, the frozen pinecones, sweet with resin, were plucked

and lit afire. The towns this far north were fewer and further between. Where people aggregated—in hamlets and villages—disappeared in the flat haze of snow. Smoke from the chimneys of homesteads was awash in the gray sky.

Portage la Prairie was the only visible sign of civilization. Against the winter night, it shown brilliantly. Matt had not started his fire yet and the lights of the town cut through the night and through the slotted spaces between the conifers. Upon first glance, he thought the vision to be a lake reflecting the sky above. But there was no sky above, only the cover of the clouds heavy with oncoming snow.

Matt turned to the Clydesdale and stroked the frozen fur.

"You think it's a town?" he asked. When he spoke his breath crystallized and fell before him. "Well, me too."

He loaded his gear and rolled the tarp up, stuffing it into his saddlebag. He mounted the horse and rode to the distant vision.

He arrived in the town as a man harried by the northern winters: his leg wrappings were worn into rags, his face plastered with frozenness. The beast he rode upon

was frosted over and snorted jets of steam from his nostrils.

An inn at the center of Portage la Prairie betrayed itself with a candle in the window and a man behind a desk reading a ledger. Matt hitched his horse there and entered.

The man at the desk sat upright in the chair and adjusted his spectacles.

"Can—may I help you sir?" he asked.

Matt looked around the empty parlor, "I need a room."

"Yes, certainly. ...You from around here?"

"Border country. I'm a border agent."

"Little too far north aren't ya?"

"Looking for someone." Matt leaned on the counter; his clothes were getting heavier with melt and thaw. "Can I get a room?"

"Yes," he handed Matt a key. "Here you go, room five."

"I need my horse stabled too." He flipped the man at the counter a coin and turned to go up the stairs.

"Eh, uh, sir?"

Matt turned.

"Whose trail you been on?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well, what trail you been ridin' on?"

"None. None at all."

ii.

When Matt shot the two men at the trading post, he shot them in the head. The first he got in the center of the forehead and the man's eyes crossed and drifted upwards trying to see the wound. He collapsed on the floor dead. The second man caught Matt's shot in the base of the skull and another shot in the shoulder blade. He squirmed and writhed until a third shot at close range paralyzed him with death. A woman in the corner dropped her sack of cornmeal and fled from the place screaming for law.

"I'm a border agent," Matt told the owner of the trading post. "I'm gonna need a mule to get these cusses—their bodies—back down to the Dakotas."

"You shot Robert and Jim."

"That's what they called themselves around here. Down in the Montana Territory, these boys were fugitives, escaped from a train when they were being transported into the States."

"They lived up here for the last twenty years. They was father an' son."

"No, one was a lot older than the other."

A burly man charged through the door. "I'm Sheriff Hampton," he said. He kept his hand on his gun. "You're the shooter here?"

"He says he's a border agent, Tom."

"Eh, is that right?"

Matt showed the six point star pinned to the inside of his coat to the sheriff. The sheriff looked to the two bodies on the floor.

"Good Lord! You shot—"

"Bob and James. I know." Matt disassembled his pistol and examined the barrel. He blew into it and watched a puff of dust and ashes of smoke billow from the end.

"Listen here," the sheriff said and took a step forward.

Matt drew his second pistol. It pointed at the sheriff's gut. "Watch yourself, sheriff."

"You can't come into our town and claim bounty on anyone you please, son."

The shopkeeper walked casually to the gun rack. "Don't do that," Matt said without looking and the shopkeeper stopped walking.

"You got a bounty paper on these two?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Did?"

"I burnt it."

"Then how do you know that these—"

"I memorized the paper."

When the sheriff opened his mouth to speak, Matt shot him. Then he shot the shopkeeper.

He rode farther north. As he rode he closed his eyes like a meditative mendicant guided by an all-seeing being. In his thoughts he reconciled the faces of the men he'd slain with those countenances sketched on the bounty papers. And the more he thought about it, the more he thought the sheriff and shopkeeper looked like two more of the criminals on a bounty paper he burned.

In the north country, Matt did not search for a whore. His stops in the hamlets and budding towns were to find the men of his bounty book. And though he frequented the saloons—taverns they were called this far north—he turned down the young females who propositioned him. He did not drink. He preferred to sleep in the cheapest room available, leaving before daybreak.

Snow became thicker, more like dust blowing vacant and erratic in the wind. The trundling of his Clydesdale's

hooves sent splays of snow splashing and the hooves sinking deeper and slower. Tiny icicles formed on Matt's beard and mustache. Over several hours of exposure, the crystals would bond together and his face became a mask of white.

And when he laid in the backroom of the next saloon, rented to him for a few pennies, he dreamt of lying with Utah Jones. He closed his eyes and imagined his body under hers, him in the place of George, her lips meeting his, melting the flakes of snow into beads of dew. But the image of their hooded hanging bodies crept to the periphery of his fantasy. If he had tobacco, smoking it only sharpened the vision. He'd stub out the cigarette, close his eyes—this time for sleep—and he, like the specters in his vision, only saw black.

Two men came out of a tavern huddling close to one another, tottering through the snow. It was a short walk from the low lit building with high peaked roofs and the rest of the hamlet. The men busied themselves with various stylings of old songs put to new lyrics. They stopped to laugh heartily at each new rendition, their breath sending brumes of winter smoke into the air.

"You can't change her name," the one bellowed.

"Why in the hell not?"

"It's the name of the blasted song!" "I'll rename the song."

Again the men guffawed, and the one said he needed to take a piss.

"Brewed up another cup o' what they're servin' in the tavern."

The man began to urinate. "This here is a little less salty than the shite in there."

Steam rose in a line from where it hit the snow. The man leaned his head back and watched the vapor rise in the moonlight.

"Tip o' your pecker gonna freeze right to the ground," his companion said.

"Long enough that I'd make it halfway home 'fore it catches."

"Not in this cold."

From farther out Matt studied the two drunkards. His horse huffed.

"Hush, hush," he said and stroked the horse's nose. He unbuttoned his long coat and crystalline dust from the released humidity wisped out in the still night.

"You stay here," he said. With a single lash he fastened the reins to a low-hanging bough. "I gotta get closer."

He trundled out from the grove of trees behind a snow bank. Before he sank too deep, he drew his pistols and pulled his coat shut. Moonlight came down—and though half-waned—it shone brightly on the snow. Keeping to the shadows, Matt crept up on his prey. He stopped to scoop a handful of snow, and he ate it. And when he breathed again, it made no clouds.

The drunk shook himself and pulled his pants shut.

"Pecker's an icicle."

"Least it's hard."

"Shhh. ...You hear that?"

"Good thing you waited 'til we were outside."

"No..."

There was a second click. This time the companion said he heard it too. Then there was gunfire; two shot staccato scars on the darkness. The man's companion shrieked. He leant toward the body. A figure appeared from the nearby snow bank. The man shrieked again. Throwing his arms high above his head with the rags and wrappings of his wintertime garb swaying, he began to run. Another shot

blistered out into the night. Two more shots followed and the man fell into the bed of snow without sound.

iii.

The lakes farther north, ever farther north in the deep, deep snow, laid in the night as shadowed holes in the landscape. The edges were frozen solid, shelved out into a brittle crust and breaking into the waters. The starred skies reflected in the cold and crystalline murk, void of life. If there was life, it slumbered in the algid fluids, awaiting the coming of the sun.

Matt rode his Clydesdale to the ice's edge and it cracked; but it did not give way under the weight of the horse's hooves. When the beast drank of the wintered waters, he whinnied, a frost billowing from his yawp. The fractures in the ice crackled, resonating as brittle burning kindling. Matt looked to the moon: first the one mirrored in the lake, then to the one reflecting in the sky. He pulled his badge out from the inside of his jacket and held it up against the night.

"Don't look much like any of the stars I see," he said.

He angled it in the light of the cosmos, seeing if he could make it glint, but the badge was too tarnished. In a single silent motion, he threw the badge into the lake and watched for a ripple. The water remained stagnant. He sighed and another cloud expanded from his mouth. Then he kicked his Clydesdale and let forth a yaw and the horse began to gallop across the ice, breaking into crystals and dust, falling to the wash chasming in their wake.

They rode beast and man as one, past the frozen shelves and the threats of antediluvian waters, to where the snow drifted and blew over itself like an endless bed of salt. They slowed and circled back around to the edge of the body of water.

The Clydesdale stood stock still on the shore, silhouetted by a drift, banked high and catching the rays of night. Matt lay in the snow and gasped, palpitating clouds into the air. The ice flows they created buoyed across the lake and distorted the mirage of heaven. And Matt wept. His tears froze in the lashes of his eyes and burnt winter-crisp to the skin of his face. He pulled off one glove, biting the finger and yanking at it with his teeth. The bare hand fumbled in the powdered snow for his

pistol. All was numbed to the point it burned. And the skin of his hand seared with the rimed coating of the metal gun.

"Oh God," he said and he pulled the gun from its holster. His thumb mustered back the hammer until it clicked into place. His forefinger wrapped around the trigger. The small circle of the muzzle branded his temple with cold. His teeth clenched and cemented together with frozen saliva.

"My God," he cried and pressed the trigger, but there was no sound.

The bodies of the delivered were left behind in the snow as Matt knew they would be well preserved in the cold. Bounties no longer held the relevance they once had; instead, the men he killed vaguely reminded him of those men from his past. The need for justice, he told his Clydesdale, was why they would return to the south when it began to thaw—he could see clearly what was wrong and right in St. John, what injustices had been granted. In Aurora too. And farther back, into the west, into the genesis, into the towns they passed through between here and the great dead lake.

He lit a couple of pine cones on fire with a match. Resin smoldered and caught, cackling and spitting sparks as he added them to the pile of pine boughs he gathered at dusk.

Usually the fires Matt built were economical—only enough to provide warmth, to cook by and melt the snow from his boots. But tonight Matt piled the boughs high—some still clumped with snow and the snow turned to plumes of steam—and the flames grew. Heat radiated from the conflagration with brutal majesty and drove both wanderer and his horse back. Tongues of flames licked the sky, bits of ember needles piercing the sky.

Then Matt began to dig.

The cave he made in the snow held heat well. He dug into the side of an embankment of snow, curving the angle of entry to trap heat better and guard against misguided winds. Heat from the fire cauterized the opening. He dug deeper, nearly straight down to where only a reflection of a sliver of light trickled down. And when it was finished, in the last hours before dawn, Matt gathered his saddle and guns, set his horse to graze freely, and crawled inside.

He slept more soundly than he had in previous days. In his mind he recapitulated his time in the north country, replaying the events over and over, then recasting the men he'd slain with others he knew from a lifetime before. He dreamt of shooting Lex Talionis where he slept in a hotel. Once the smoke cleared, he looked to the window, the sections of glass coming together to form an empty cross. In the hallway a dead whore lay out across the floor. Her hair was flaxen, covering her face. Matt sauntered down the hall, stepping over the whore and descending the stairs, past the empty reception desk and out into the forest. The door of the inn closed behind him and the only light left came, burning like a fallen piece of day, from under the gnarled roots of a pine tree. Approaching cautiously, Matt reached for his pistols. But the firearms were not there. As many other times in his delusions, Matt found a pair of sandals. He drifted without walking toward the opening in the snow. Though it glowed and furnaced a brilliant heat, the surrounding snow did not melt.

"'Tis a pyre," a woman said.

A black woman, a shriveled sickly woman, naked in the night stood next to Matt.

"'Tis a pyre," she said again, and took a coin from a satchel slung between her breasts. The coin glinted in the moonbeam rays penetrating through the pine forest canopy.

She tossed the coin into the light.

"For atonement," she said and put another coin into Matt's palm. The metal burned with cold. Upon close inspection of the specie, Matt found it to be inscribed with a six-point star. He looked up to ask the negro woman a question, but she was gone. He turned back to the light, to cast his profits into the glow, where he could see a creature struggling in the flames. Half man and half beast, the figure neighed and growled as it was consumed. One coin glowed red hot over its eye. And it asked Matt in language he did not know for the other coin. It clapped its hoof-hands together in a signal of mercy.

The thunder of the beast's clap expelled Matt from the forest of his dreams. Breath came from his mouth as only a slight steam. Ice had formed on the ceiling of his cave. He blinked, shook his head and sat up as far as he could. The fur he laid under himself had frozen to the snow-turned ice beneath it. The cloth of his clothes was rigid. He maneuvered himself as a man stiffened by rigamortis and

forced back into existence. He crawled from his catacomb bed toward the aperture. Light from the sky—slate, washed even and blank—blended into the cave's interior.

As he emerged, the winter elements crushed onto the man as an unforgiving force; the wind whipped through his garments, the sun remained masked in a gauze of clouds. He squinted out into the horizon, to where the trees grew more sparsely. A lone rider crossed the open space. Despite the size of his horse, the rider himself was small, dwarfen—a child. No one trailed behind him. Nor did any precede him. The horse slowed. The child kicked the horse in the rump and cursed him, using God's name. And when the beast began to move faster, the child praised his animal using the same name. The child did not see Matt. He retreated into his cavern. Shuffling through the frozen rags he found one of his pistols. Pressing his mouth to the barrel, he breathed slowly, deeply into the shaft. He rubbed the length of the barrel with his hands until he felt warmth. He opened the chamber and searched his pockets for a bullet. He found a bullet and loaded it into the gun before scuttling back to the opening of the cave. The rider still progressed across the desert meadow. Drawing a bead on the figure proved to be difficult. Matt squinted hard against the sheen of

white. The faint sun casting a menacing glow on the whole of the earth. Matt trained the pistol's sight on the figure. He steeled himself against the cold so as to not shake. Wind washed over his body and he leaned into the breeze, lifting his arm above the proposed trajectory. Then he fired. In the interim, in the space of time before the boy fell dead unto the snow, Matt remembered the beast of his dream. Then the boy fell, and Matt retreated to the tomb he'd carved in the wanderlust.

IV

i.

The porch steps were planks of hardwood pounded fast to the frame. When the family walked upon them, they did not creak. Jack Patrick ascended the stairs and looked back onto the shallow where they lived now, where the trees abdicated their positions for their island kingdom—the palace refurbished and restored to a grandeur never granted here. He looked up the slight slope to the plains. And he saw that it was good.

The front door hung true and sealed tight behind Jack Patrick and his family. The hearth was constructed of finished wood and above it was the empty cradle meant for his rifle. The children played before the fireplace on the sun-patched, planked floor. And he knew this place was good.

He and Marie came to their room upstairs, a white chamber with sheer curtains and a vista out to the edge of their manor and beyond. They passed the threshold and Jack Patrick held his wife's wrist. His free arm wrapped about her waist and roved over the fabric and the contour and came to rest on her skin. He smelled her hair and knew she was good too.

Jack Patrick lay on the floor of the parlor. The children grappled at his arms and he growled at them. He rose to his feet, the children swinging from his arms and laughing. Isabelle could sit up on her own now and she clapped. Marie came into the room and leaned against the doorframe. Homely scents of cornbread and stew trailed behind her. It was dinnertime.

Supper was set on the table and the family sat the length of the table, as space allowed them. Jack Patrick and Marie sat at the center. The children squabbled in their seats, their knees bumping against the table legs. Jack Patrick took the bread and broke it, covering it with butter that melted into oil.

Nicholas leaned to his mother and asked if they could say a blessing. "Yes," she said to Jack Patrick. "A blessing in our new house."

He stopped chewing, stared intently at the biscuit in his hand and said with a wad of bread in his cheek, "This is good."

They all waited for the blessing to continue, then when the eldest of the children realized their benefactor had nothing more to say, she whispered, "Amen."

Because the house had sat vacant for so long, the windows were covered in a film of dust which, over time, became a waxen film. Jack Patrick scraped his fingernail along the window pane and inspected the finding he collected.

"Windows are dirty like a whorehouse," he said to no one in particular.

"We could—I could wash them," Marie offered.

"No," Jack Patrick said. He squinted so he could see out through the slice of clean window his fingernail had carved in the dirt. "Nicholas and Elizabeth and me will do it."

Without being told, the children gathered a bowl of water, and a rag.

Then they all began to scrub the panes, the dirt dripping down in beads. Jack Patrick moved outside and cleaned the adverse side of the windows. They wiped the glass until—despite the glass's own imperfections—there was a crystallized vision of the world beyond.

Rooms in the homestead adjoined in strange ways: the closets were double-doored passages from one chamber to

another, and the nursery conjoined the parental suite. Only between the first and second floors was there only one passageway.

Most evenings, Marie called the children to her room and they came from different directions. Together they recited the Lord's Prayer. When Nicholas asked about the nearest church and if they would ever go to a Sunday service there, Marie kissed him on the forehead and told him it was a long way into town and winter was coming on soon.

Once the children were asleep, Marie would find Jack Patrick and he would be sitting in the parlor, cleaning his weapons.

"It's late," she said.

"I know. I was cleaning my gun."

"You haven't used it since I met you."

"No call for it to fall into dilapidation."

She sat across from her husband. "The children asked about going to church one of these Sundays."

Jack Patrick slid the bolt handle back and clicked it into place. "What did you tell them?"

"I told them what you told me: the journey into town is too long."

"It is."

Marie watched him wipe down the stock of the gun with a damp rag, so it glistened in the firelight. "We will have to go into town before the winter."

"I suppose you're right. You could all go to church while I get the supplies and rations." He squinted one eye and examined the length of the barrel, down to the notched sight at the muzzle.

"You don't ever come upstairs to put the children to sleep."

"I'm used to the night."

"You can still help put them to bed."

Tenderly, Jack Patrick set his rifle on the floor and he reached for her hand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll do better."

In the nights following, Jack Patrick sat with the family through the evening rituals of prayer and discussion. When the children's eyes glazed with fatigue, he carried them to be buried in shrouds of blankets.

"Daddy Jack," Nicholas asked during one of the nightly routines, "can you tell us a story?"

A small smile crooked the corner of Jack Patrick's mouth. The children's moniker, instilled by their mother, sounded unnatural in their mouths. "Sure."

Marie squeezed her husband's hand and she got up from the bed. She left the room to turn down the children's beds and see to Isabelle. As if drawn by their mother's absent heat, the children moved closer to their step-father.

"Alright," he said, "what's your ma usually tell you... or does she read?"

"She reads the Bible," one said.

"Sometimes she just tells us a story from there; she doesn't even need the words in front of her," the other said.

"Last time we heard about the Israelites and Moses."

"But you've had adventures, Daddy Jack."

"Yeah, tell us one of those!"

"How about I just make one up?"

"Aw, I wanted to hear about your life before we met you."

"Yeah."

"I'll make one up; you won't even know the difference."

The children nestled against him.

"Alright," he said. "There was a man who lived in the plains, where we live. Well, he actually lived a little south of here. And he had a wife. And she was pregnant—with child—their first child. And it came up that he had to leave—"

"Like our father?"

Jack Patrick paused, thinking about the man in the story and said yes.

"Why'd he have to leave?" the other child asked.

"A stranger told him he had to go to a distant city for a population count."

"What's that?"

"Well the government, the people who control the states and territories, they keep track of how many people there are. That's what this man was doing."

"Did he take his wife?" "No. The trail would have been too hard for her. She was pregnant." Jack Patrick stopped again and started slower. "The place he had to go was on the other side of the mountains. So he left."

"This man did not have a compass or a map. He just used the stars to navigate—to find his way. When it rained, he found shelters in nature, in caves and thick pine forests. When he was hungry, he could find berries in the

bushes and fish caught in eddies of shallow streams were plucked from the waters with his bare hands. He made friends with the Indians and traded with them along the way. This man, when he traveled, it was night—because of the stars. See? ...He slept through the days. It was hot because it was summer, June, and he was about to enter the desert."

Jack Patrick looked through the reflecting window pane, out into the blackness that lay beyond and within.

"How'd he find water in the desert, Daddy Jack?" the child asked.

"He did not." Jack Patrick's gaze remained focused on the window. "Not at first. He broke small plants apart, grasses, and gnashed those between his teeth so the juices ran out. That sustained him."

"But he couldn't live on that alone."

"No. He could not. It rained and he laid out with all his gear the guns big metal belt buckle spurs. He laid out in the storm lightning all around him, his mouth wide open to catch the rain. He walked on that night with enough energy to walk through the entire following day. He came to a place in the desert of strange rocks cropped up like they had boiled, hardened from the Earth itself. He walked

through this desert valley and there was bad water there, sitting stale in a cake of mud. At night the rock faces turned to real faces, the sun reflecting off them. In the night he continued a wearied walk. The storm clouds he had praised now clouded the stars from the sky. He wandered about the stone goblins without direction. When the sun early in the morning showed him the right way it was too late. He had already collapsed."

The children were slumbering, twitching in their sleep, the dreams alive in their brains and Marie stood outside the doorway, whispering a bedtime prayer for her kin and for her husband.

ii.

At times Jack Patrick would walk by himself out past the sight of the house. He did not say where he was going or what he was looking for. It seemed a reflexive action from his days of scouting ahead of the posse for trouble. He always took his rifle.

He walked out as far as the daylight would let him—and the sojourn became shortened each day with the changing of seasons. And once he estimated he had reached the apex of his journey, he would look out at the plains stretched out

before him. Somewhere not far beyond his eyesight was the town of Sheyenne. Much farther beyond was the town of Aurora. Beyond there it was rumored there was only desert. He shivered.

On his way home, as the day turned murky with the pollution of night, he might hear a noise. He stopped, crouched and leveled the gun at his shoulder. He held his breath. The only noise came from the strawed stalks of grass crackled beneath his pivoting foot. A moment passed and he stood and continued to walk back to the homestead.

When he arrived home, he could smell the food cooking.

"Did you shoot anything, Daddy Jack?" Nicholas fled across the grasses in front of the house.

"No, there was nothing to shoot at."

"How far did you go?"

"I went to the edge of the daytime."

"How far is that?"

"It seems to be getting closer every day."

Nicholas looked at the rifle. "What's after that?"

"Towns I suppose."

"And what's after that?"

"The desert."

"And what's after that?"

Jack Patrick sighed. "There's nothing after that—eventually it'll eclipse us all."

"What's that mean?" Jack Patrick began sauntering toward the door of the homestead. "It means if someone doesn't hurry up, we'll be lost."

Quite some time passed before Marie brought up Jack Patrick's conversation with Nicholas. As was her manner, she kept herself busy while she spoke to her husband. This time she folded blankets and stacked them on the bed.

"After Nicholas talks to you he always has questions," she said.

"That so."

"It is. —He says you talk like everything is a mystery."

"Hm." Jack Patrick sat on the edge of the bed to take his boots off. Before the stack of folded blankets could topple over, Marie caught them and repositioned them on the far side of the bed.

She let another measured silence pass. She folded another blanket—this one a quilt.

"He tells me what you say."

Jack Patrick nodded and rubbed his bare foot.

Then she said his name and he looked at her.

"He tells me how you look when you say these terrible things."

"These terrible things?"

"How you're always talking about the darkness and bad people, how the world destroys people."

"What would you rather me talk about?"

Marie had quit her folding, her hands on her hips. Her eyelids fluttered. When she spoke next her voice would crack.

"What would you rather me talk about?" Jack Patrick asked a second time. "I suppose I could lie to him—tell him the world is a place filled with saints and do-gooders. But you and I—and probably the children—know that isn't true."

"Stop it. Is everything so awful?"

Jack Patrick did not look at his wife when he said it was. "If it seems like I'm constantly shadows, it's because I am. That's all this place—this world—is: a series of shadows and my job is to chase them down, hide in them, become a shadow and run from other men."

iii.

In the time the sun fell behind the horizon, scattering its rays further between like a glass bulb dropped on a flat rock, a figure approached. The form cast a long shadow blending into the shuffled grass shadows. Jack Patrick spied the man through the window when he first came into view.

"Wait here," he told his wife.

Marie rose from the bed, leaving the children near slumber. But her husband already bounded down the stairs. And she heard him ready the rifle. The front door opened.

Jack Patrick set the rifle on its butt and held it by the muzzle. Squinting hard against the dusky sky, he scanned the landscape. Whatever had been crossing disappeared.

"You there," Jack Patrick said.

His voice did not echo. And he called out again.

"Yessir." The reply came back as an echo.

The stranger approached much faster than Jack Patrick anticipated. Now the man was nearly to the porch. In his scansion, Jack Patrick had set his sights out too far. Before him an old man stood crooked, leaning on a cane.

"Said 'yessir.'"

Jack Patrick hefted the rifle and held it by the forestock.

"Late out here on the plains."

"Late anywhere'd I'd venture."

"You alone?"

"Yessir."

Jack Patrick's eyes studied the increasing shadows. Exhalations of his breath began to form in the oncoming cold.

"What're you doin' lone on the plains?" "Just am."

"You're cripple."

"Still make my way pretty well. Can't say—"

"Y'got a horse?"

"Just a shillelagh."

"That a German breed?"

Darkness had fallen and the only source of light came from within the homestead. The forms consumed in the light caused the emissions to flicker as they moved about. The shadow Jack Patrick cast himself obscured the stranger and he only knew of the drifter's existence because the old cripple chuckled.

"What? Is it a breed from another parts?"

"A shillelagh's my walkin' stick."

"So what are you?"

"I'm a lost Irishman, lookin' for a place to stay."

Jack Patrick thumbed back the hammer of his gun and leveled it at the man. "No."

"But I could—"

"No."

From out in the abyss, Jack Patrick heard the man whimper and begin another appeal. He stopped short of begging and turned back toward the horizon from whence he came. Jack Patrick went back into the homestead where Marie stood by the hearth.

Jack Patrick set the rifle back in its rack.

"A drifter," he said.

"I heard."

"Wanted a place to stay. Wanted to stay here."

"Why didn't you let him?"

"He's a drifter—can't be trusted. Never know if he's got a posse on the way behind him."

"It'll be cold tonight. Could frost."

"It might."

"And you sent him back out into it."

Jack Patrick studied the fire burning in the fireplace. He looked back at his wife. She was staring through the parted curtains, out into the velveteen night.

"Men like that are desperate," he said.

Later in the eve, once the children had drifted off into their respective slumbers, when the stars lay blanketed in the clouds, Jack Patrick watched his wife undress. Skin like silver gleamed in the residual light produced and seeping into the room from unknown sources. She turned and her breasts too sheened in the misty light; two small dark misshapen circles marked the form of her nipples.

"Come here," Jack Patrick said. He held out his hand.

She slipped off her skirt and untied her petticoats. They fell to the floor silently. Her legs bathed in moonlight and they curved and creased where they joined.

She stood naked. She shivered.

"Come here," Jack Patrick said a second time.

Somewhere in the dark a voice questioned Jack Patrick as to what he really was. The woman came to the bed and lay with her husband, her back pressed against his chest, dimples in her skin smoothing out when their combined heat

warmed her. They both stared out the window, searching through nothingness behind the veils for a semblance of life. He fondled her, and she asked him what he was. But there was nothing there, as they both suspected.

Waking before the dawn broke over the yonder horizon, Jack Patrick dressed hastily. Marie still lay in bed, swaddled and unrumpled. None in the house stirred except for him. He took the rifle from the rack above the hearth before riding off in the direction the stranger had taken. Even in the early morning frosts, thick and paralyzing, the wayward's path could not be found. No blades were bent, nor were any broken. Jack Patrick inhaled the air full in his nostrils and smelled no fire other than the White Elm log fire billowing from his homestead's chimney. Then he called out the drifter's name and not even an echo returned.

V.

i.

Days at the homestead in the Dakota Territory balanced between seasons, seeming to never fully commit too long to any singular condition. The winds remained mild, and if ever there was a frost on the grass, it turned to dew in

the early hours. A shed out back of the homestead made a shelter for the horses. Jack Patrick tied a rope from the back door of the house to the latch on the shed.

"What's this for?" Nicholas asked.

Jack Patrick pulled the rope tight so it creaked with strain. "From what I've heard, the winters up this way are hard—snow thick enough to blind a man."

"And this'll help you find your way?"

"Should."

The boy examined the lifeline to the shed. He plucked it and watched it wag up and down. "'Cause you gotta feed the animals."

"That's right."

"If our home wasn't tied to theirs—"

"They'd die. Or I could get lost. The snow's up here can blind a man, so I might have to walk between here and there with my eyes closed. And the animals would still die."

Jack Patrick told the boy to come with him and they continued to ready for the winter's onset. They covered the wagon with a raggedy tarpaulin, and Jack Patrick instructed his stepson to pull the corners underneath so a cord could be laced through the grommets.

"Or the wind could blow the cover off."

"That's right."

"Until the snow gets here to weight it down."

"...Yeah."

As the males foretold, the frosts became thicker, harsher. Free-grazing beasts aggregated in the shed; the wild chickens and fowl roosted in the pens with the boar and the horses. For the moment, they cuddled each other and snuggled in a type of harmony reserved for genuflecting soldiers, who, in entering battle, seek forgiveness for what is to come.

Amongst the days of growing frosts and falling temperatures, there was a warm spell. The warmth came not from the sun—though the rays did glow more sweetly and drizzled down on the plains like honey—but it came on the wind, cascading down from the swell and settling like a stray circling itself before curling up in slumber. The windows showed the outside in its autumn nakedness clearly, without the filter and refraction of the ice crystalline prisms amplifying and sharding the honey sun into a blinding glower.

The warmth drove a sort of frenzy into the homestead. Those who were readied for the winter became unhinged, like an elderly man who finds himself drifting into ultimate sleep and suddenly jerked back into existence, finding the afterlife to be only a cruel dream told to him and perpetuated as a childhood bedtime story.

Marie tended to the little one. Having been almost weaned, the abrupt weather change seemed to make her more dependant on her mother's milk again. Nicholas and Elizabeth ran without their coats through the last swaths of swaying grass. They eventually came back to the porch and collapsed, gasping and laughing, their breaths a series of heaving palpitations.

In their stalls—the makeshift boarding nailed between the uprights of the shed—the horses bucked and neighed. As if infected by their madness, Jack Patrick opened the shed and allowed his beasts to run unbridled as his children. He went to the meadow in front of the homestead with a coil of rope. The horse unshod hooves trampled rhythmically, thumping a steady cadence across the grasses. Compelled by some primal urge Jack Patrick walked closer to the beasts until he could smell their musk, hear their hearts pounding in time, feel their snorts like jets flecked with mucus. He

whispered to them and stretched out his hand to stroke the coarse hide fur.

From her vantage point in the upstairs window, child at her breast, Marie watched her husband wrangle what he had set free and bring it back into captivity.

"Nicholas," Jack Patrick called once the beasts had all been stabled.

The boy ran from the far side of the porch. "You call for me?"

"I did. Can you feed the animals?"

The boy nodded and began to trot toward the shed.

"Give 'em a good amount; this warm spell won't last long," Jack Patrick yelled after him.

Not knowing if his stepson heard him, Jack Patrick went into his home. He found his wife still at the window in their bedroom.

"It's good outside," he said.

His wife shushed him and he saw Isabelle had fallen asleep.

"She hasn't been napping like she should, not since this weather turned like it did."

"I know it."

He kissed his wife quickly, and sat on the edge of the bed and began to tug at his boots. A cry resounded from the distance, resonating from outside the house. The husband and wife exchanged glances. A moment later the front door slammed, feet clamored up the stairs and into the children's room. And there were sobs. Isabelle stirred, but did not wake.

The parents went to the children's room and found Nicholas huddled in a corner, weeping.

"What is it?" his mother asked.

There was blood on his hands.

"My God. Are you hurt?"

"No," the boy cried. "The animals."

Jack Patrick turned to leave, the boy calling after him, saying he tried to save it, but the beast was too strong.

In the corner of the shed, the boar, the hunchback fattened grunt, stooped over the remains of a chicken. The other fowl clucked nervously. The boar snarled and garbled as it rooted through the carcass with its stubbled tusks. Feathers plastered to its face with dried and purpled blood. As he mulled the raw flesh in his horned jowls, the

forks of his hooves scraped dual lines of blood across the floor.

The boar took little notice Jack Patrick, except for a short fit of hurried snorting as the man approached. Another chicken hobbled, half-eaten and dead—its body only operating out of habit. It traipsed in a circle then collapsed and twittered before laying still. The swine lumbered to the newly dead and chomped through the already open wound. The bones crackled and the softer things beneath squelched.

"Damn you," Jack Patrick muttered.

Though he brought his rifle, he did not use it; he leaned it against a stall gate where the horses watched as indifferent witnesses. He took up the manure trowel, running its edge along the stones of the floor until it honed a jagged blade.

Even in slaughter the swine continued to devour its killings. It squealed as a new-born piglet would because it could do nothing else. When it was done, blood pooled around the fallen and ran over like an offering to a forgotten god.

That night the family ate pork. The gutted carcass of the boar hung from the eave of the shed and Jack Patrick kept a low fire, fueled by damp and mossy wood, burning beneath the dead pig.

"Have smoked pork earlier than I planned," Jack Patrick said. But no one else laughed, nor did they eat the meat.

"It's all right," Jack Patrick said. He cleaved another slab of the meat from the serving pot and ladled the gravy fat on top of it. "I've heard pigs can be brutes. Didn't know they'd be like that."

"Jack," Marie said.

The boy was crying silently. His older sister picked at her portion of the pork.

"It ain't gonna eat you," Jack Patrick said.

The boy ran from the table and up the stairs. After a moment Marie and Elizabeth followed, leaving Jack Patrick and baby Isabelle.

"Well," he said with a wad of meat balled in his cheek, "guess we'll have plenty to eat."

And the toddler clapped her hands in the pool of gravy and giblets, and the renderings dripped from her elbows while she laughed.

Jack Patrick spent a good portion of the evening finding small repairs to make: a loose knob tightened on a cupboard, a chair cane mended with a spare dowel rod. Once he figured his wife and step-children to be asleep, he went to bed.

In the morning though, his wife woke before him and it was she who spoke first.

"You have no faith," she said. She looked at him with her eyes. Jack Patrick studied his pistol. He rotated the cylinder, checking to see there was a bullet in each chamber.

"I have never said that I don't have beliefs. -I've just seen different than you and you thought we were the same."

She looked out the window towards the plains and the horizon, out to where they met, beyond oblivion.

"When you and I met, you told me you were on a holy mission, a pilgrimage. I didn't know it was really a death march to the same place Heath was taking us."

The spurs rattled like winter rain as Jack Patrick secured them to his boots. He stood and strode across the

room, the spurs tinkling under his feet as fallen beads of snow. He stretched a bandolier of bullets over his shoulder and it matched the metal studded belt of bullets around his waist.

"None of that matters," he said.

Marie stood at the window. The blue of her dress and the gold of her hair melted into the sky and the sun beyond.

"You saved us," she said. She said it so Jack Patrick could barely hear it.

"I've ridden with men who had no faith in anything and they were fine men. I've rode with men who proclaimed religion and their faith and they were bad men." He took down the rifle from the rack on the wall, checked the chamber and slid it into its studded sheath. "All that matters is that we know salvation—as you'd call it—was offered and we've forsaken it."

Marie did not turn around, she did not look upon her husband then and she asked him if he was going for a ride.

"Yes," he said and left the room.

Jack Patrick mounted his horse and pulled at the reins. He looked back at the homestead. It sat in contrast

to the sky behind it, which brewed silently and swelled, encroaching upon the blued and sunful sky, swallowing up its rays and reducing them to brief aberrations of light and sound. Yet the home remained untouched as monumental kingdom amidst the oncoming maelstrom.

Nicholas and Elizabeth played under the shelter of the porch roof. Isabelle was with them. She toddled between them, taking unsure steps. With another tug of the reins, Jack Patrick yawed the horse back towards the disappearing, clear horizon. He stroked the horse's mane and reached forward to clamp the metal blinders shut over the horse's eyes. The storm could startle him. Jack Patrick gave a swift kick with his spurs and the man and his beast together rode fast, wild unto the dying day.

iii.

Jack Patrick awakened fitfully. The covers of the familiar bed groped and tangled with his limbs and were made tauter by the moisture of his sweat. His chest heaved as he inhaled his first conscious breath. He had visions in his slumber. There had been dreams of dying beasts, wasted into skeletons and forced to wander. In his dream he tried to herd them towards the horizon, but the animals cantered

about in circles. When the horses and burro died, he sat down to cry. That's when he realized it was he who was wearing the sandals. After that, he woke and it was darkness.

"Jack Patrick," a voice called and he felt her fingers brush his hair back. She called his name again. His lips pulled apart and his tongue peeled from the roof of his mouth.

"No, it's all right," she said from beyond, "the doctor says you are too weak."

He rubbed the backs of his hands against his eyes and they streamed with liquid and felt like smooth glass beads. He felt his lashes shut and reopen. It was all the same.

Jack Patrick walked from his bed in a week's time. He asked to sit by the fire and Elizabeth guided him down the hall and then down the stairs. He negotiated his way through the kitchen and sat in a chair before the crackling source of heat. Elizabeth put something warm in his hands and told him to eat it; it was a biscuit.

"The doctor says you are very blessed," Elizabeth said.

The biscuit pulled apart in his hands and he could feel the plume of steam rise from its interior. He put a flake into his mouth and it dissolved on his tongue.

"So the preacher doctor came."

There was a clanging of pans and Elizabeth said yes. There was the rumble of the chair over the planked floor. She was not yet tall enough to reach the cabinets.

"He used to be a preacher, Daddy Jack; he only does medicine now."

"I know."

"He said there must have been two booms: one from the sky and the other from you."

"Me?"

"When the lightning hit you, the bullets, your guns, all exploded. Glad died."

"Who?"

"Glad, your horse. You gave name to her."

"Oh."

"Your pistol went off and shot her. Doctor-The-Former Reverend said the death was incidence."

"Instantaneous?"

"Yes, that's it, that's what he said. All the guns went off except the rifle. The shot was still in the chamber. We put it back in its rack above the mantle."

Jack Patrick put the last of the biscuit in his mouth. The chair rumbled back across the floor to the other set of cabinets.

"Are you baking?" "Yes. I told Ma and Nicholas to leave. I wanted to bake you a pie."

"Oh."

"I can't reach the canned peaches though."

Jack Patrick stood and walked the length of the kitchen over to the cabinets. Elizabeth took his arm and guided it to the top shelf.

"To the right," she said and he moved his arm there. He felt the can under his fingers and took it down.

"A peach pie. That's quite a treat."

"Yup," she said and trotted back across the floor.

Jack Patrick walked away from the warmth of the kitchen into the parlor. If there had been a fire in that fireplace, it had fallen cold and ashed. He could hear his wife and stepson on the porch. There was a gentle thumping coming from outside. He surmised that they must be beating the dust out of the rugs.

He reached to the wall above the mantle, finding his rifle cradled in its rack. He felt the cold metal shaft and it was smooth and still. He withdrew his hand. There was laughter outside. Elizabeth was using a sifter in the kitchen. He felt the gun a second time and it was sticky under the moisture of his hand. He felt a pulse within him and it felt as if the gun writhed with life, ready to explode.

When the winter arrived, it came in a blistering front; a charged locomotive speeding along steel rails so brittle with frost, they snapped apart into shards, engineered by a banshee crying out shrill and shrewd the name of winter. And, as trains do, the full repercussions of the season trailed in a back draft behind the locomotive vessel: It did not snow, not yet; now it was just the deadening time. They had yet to be buried.

Marie and the children rarely mentioned Jack Patrick's blindness. If there ever was mention of it, it was confined to a passing comment. Subtle changes took place in the homestead. The furniture migrated towards the walls and chairs were strategically placed in front of the stove and open parlor fireplaces. Jack Patrick began to walk with a staff he took to calling a shillelagh. He seldom disturbed

the curtains; he only parted the drapes to feel the glass and hence the temperature. He gravitated between an existence completely within himself, living as a cave-dwelling creature and then emerging to wreak his presence among those with whom he coexisted.

Following in the usual nightly ritual of story time, Marie recounted for the children the legend of a man called back from the dead, how his body remained intact and he cried out his savior's name in thanks. Afterwards the children asked questions—if anyone could come back from the dead.

"No," Marie told the children, "only those called by God."

"Will I ever come back from the dead—will God call me?" Nicholas asked.

Marie smiled, stroked his cheek as maternal sorts do and replied he was invincible; he'd live forever.

Jack Patrick, who had sat obstinately in the corner, snorted. "Forever is a long time."

The conversational banter ceased and uneasy silence spread over the bedroom.

"Forever is not a long time when you're with God," Marie said.

Again there was a long silence before one of the children said she wasn't tired yet and did they have to go to bed right now?

"Well," Jack Patrick said, "let's stay up for a while." Marie began to object, but he continued to speak. "We could play a game."

The idea of a game excited the children.

"How about hide and go seek?" Elizabeth said.

Nicholas agreed and even Isabelle clapped her hands in rudimentary agreement. So when the lamps were doused and only the heat glowering low from the fireplace was the only source of light in the whole house, the girls and Jack Patrick hid and Nicholas was sent to seek. He counted down and shouted he was coming to find them. Elizabeth hid with her little sister behind the kitchen counter and their giggles betrayed their hiding place. Then all three banded together to find their stepfather. They stumbled through the corridors and doorways of the house until they came to the living room with the fireplace. There Jack Patrick sat in the armchair before the fireplace, his eyes closed.

"Gotcha," Nicholas said and ran to slap at Jack Patrick's arm. His arm fell and hung slackened.

"Daddy Jack," Elizabeth cried.

The little one echoed her sister's cry.

And once all three children gathered close enough, Jack Patrick rose from the chair suddenly and scooped them in his arms.

"I've risen from the dead," he cried and the children squealed and yelled in terror.

VI.

i.

Winter winds rattled the house. Small gusts found the weak spots in the island kingdom's natural defenses and penetrated them. Marie and the children combated the drafts the best they could, using rags and summer clothes, stuffing the fabrics under door gaps and atop window jambs. Elizabeth burnt a candle and used the wax to seal a cracked window pane. At night the children slept together in one bed, drawing on each other's warmth.

Now it was the heaviest and most beastly time of winter, right before the first snowfall. Jack Patrick sat up with the fire. When he felt the blaze begin to cool, he

added wood, gingerly placing a log on the coaled remains of former logs. Moments later he heard the resin crackle and the bittersweet perfume of burnt sap, charring wood, fill the air. Smoke growled up the chimney. And the wind rattled the loose boards of the house, doors not set tight in their frames and the cracked window pane.

"Marie," Jack Patrick called.

"Yes."

She was much closer than he had realized; she sat next to him.

"I thought I heard someone walking on our porch."

"It's the wind," she said and her hand draped over the top of his.

"No," he said, "it wasn't the usual sounds the wind makes. I heard the porch boards groan like there was weight on them."

"I can look out the curtains, see if there's anything out there—a stray animal..."

"No. Get my gun."

"But—"

Jack Patrick turned to where his wife's voice came from. He made certain to not blink.

Her hand left his and a moment later he heard the rifle rattle free of the rack where it was kept.

"There should be a shot in it."

"There is."

He stood and held the firearm. It was warmed from the fire in the hearth as if some other being had held it for him, readying it for use. Again, a host of noises resound from the swound outside.

"Open the door," he said.

A blast of arctic air met Jack Patrick before he could step outside. He pumped the forestock once and stepped gingerly, his free hand outstretched to the doorway. Another gale blew strong and steady and the porch boards creaked.

"Wait," Marie said. And he could feel a force telling him to lower the gun. She pushed out of the doorway ahead of him; he could hear the cloth of her dress flapping in the wind. Then he heard her voice talking lowly to someone.

"Marie..."

"He's hurt. Hold the door open."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"We're not taking him in."

With a single jerk on the rifle, Jack Patrick was left unarmed.

Deeper breaths marked Marie's sleep. She murmured to herself and curled up, legs pulled into her chest, her hands folded and pillowed beneath her head. Jack Patrick knew not the hour, but figured it to be late, possibly toward morning. Very gently, as to not wake his wife, he slipped out of bed. He lay bare-chested on the floor and reached under the bed. With his arm he groped. Then he pulled out the hatbox, opened it and took out the pistol. He weighed the gun in his hand and nodded. Just the same he opened the cylinder and used his fingertip to check each chamber.

He rose to his feet silently. Then he walked barefoot, rolling the heels of his feet down to the pads. He reached the doorframe, felt it and turned right. Lowering his voice so it was just a whisper, he counted the paces he walked until he arrived in front of the stranger's quarters.

Inside he could hear the stranger snoring. He entered the room and paused. Still the stranger snored. If there had been light in the hall, it did not wake him. Jack Patrick shut the door behind himself. He extended the arm

not holding the gun in front of himself and walked to the stranger's bedside. Small gurgles came from the back of the man's throat. Jack Patrick circled the bed around to the opposite side and stopped. As he leant over the body he could feel the breath warm and humid with life pulsing in and out and back into the man's mouth. The man stirred in the bed and the breathing stopped. He smacked his lips together. The breathing resumed.

Jack Patrick pulled the hammer of the gun back and it clicked. The chamber rotated into place and it also clicked. He raised the gun up to the man's face and inched the barrel forward. As the man exhaled, his breath whistled in the barrel of the pistol. For a long while, Jack Patrick held this position. He held it until the pistol weighed heavy on him and his arm shook with the burden of the firearm.

There was a creak from across the room. It was the door. Though he had no vision, Jack Patrick knew his appearance. -In the shape of the light cut and thrown across the room he appeared as the ghost of a past sacrifice expelled from his dungeon cave.

The boy's voice called him by name.

ii.

Many times Marie said the stranger was a blessing. Often times she said it out loud to whoever happened to be within earshot. If Jack Patrick happened to be the one within earshot, she either recanted or justified her reasoning.

"It's just he doesn't seem to mind the snow outside and we're not used to it yet," she'd say.

Jack Patrick nodded.

But the stranger was useful. He mended the broken furniture, tended to the animals in the shed, played with the kids. It was easy to tell when he entertained the children, for they all laughed over the various voices he used.

"He told me he used to have a wife and kids of his own," Marie said while the kids were playing upstairs.

"When did he tell you that?"

"Last evening. After the kids had gone to sleep. Isabelle fell asleep right in his lap and he couldn't move so we just sat and talked."

"And he said he had a wife and kids." "Yeah. They all died from the flu epidemic in their town."

"How long ago was this?"

"You don't think he's telling me the truth."

Jack Patrick laughed to himself. "No, I think you are a child of his and he's telling you a bedtime story."

Dinner had ended. The plates had been cleaned and put back into the cabinets. The lanterns had been lit when the first of the winds blew. The gust came on like a hundred car train passing over the house—a long concussive roar.

"What's that, Ma?" Elizabeth asked.

The infant began to cry.

"It's the wind," the stranger said.

"Louder than any wind I ever heard," Jack Patrick said and he had to say it loudly.

"Means a change in the weather is comin' on," the stranger said.

Still, the children were frightened. Now the boy had begun to cry too.

"Come on," the stranger said to the children. "Come upstairs and I'll tell you how I trapped the four winds in a bag and used them to blow my boat home."

The boy sniffled. "You were a boat captain?"

"It was a long time ago," he said.

Then the sound of footsteps, the children's and their storyteller's, faded from the room and rattled up the stairs until they were indistinguishable from the din of the wind.

"I'd like for him to stay around," Marie said.

"Because you love him."

"No."

Then they both were silent.

"We're not married proper."

"I know it."

"We could be if you'd go into town."

"You know what happened in that town."

"That was between the sheriff and your brother. It doesn't mean we can't go there and get married."

"Why would you marry me—I'm blind."

"You were the one that saved us."

Even now, over the belches of wind—long and wrathful—the children laughed.

Jack Patrick shook his head. "Perhaps that was all I was supposed to do."

"Just tell me that we'll get married once the trip to town gets easier." She held Jack Patrick's hand.

"Yes," he said. "Fine. Once the way is clear."

iii.

And as quickly as the weather turned bitter, a warm westerly blew in, thawing the earth. Drifts of snow crusted over with the melt. Rivulets of runoff trickled and drained, pooling in the low spots created by the naked sun. The landscape—buried and deserted by the sun—resurrected slowly, the sheen of the melt reflecting the harsh rays back up at their originator.

Jack Patrick stepped off the porch into the sodden snows. The iced crust held his weight for a moment, then gave way. His boot collapsed into the snow where melt water flowed in over the upper. He swore to himself and took another step. The boards of the porch creaked behind him.

"Is it bright out?" Jack Patrick asked Nicholas.

"Yes," the boy said.

"Feels like it, like everything's glowing, like the whole world's afire."

Nicholas began to say something, but stopped.

"Any signs of life?" Jack Patrick asked. "Any grass, or leaves... animals?"

"No," Nicholas said. "But I can hardly... I can't... It's bright out."

"You can't see because of the light."

"Yessir."

The step-father snorted and continued trudging out deeper into the slush and iced banks of snow. The boy's footsteps followed his and they walked one in front of the other. When they stopped there was no sound. In this part of the shallows the wind did not blow.

"Animals should be waking up," Jack Patrick said and his voice sounded strange and small amongst the great blankness of it all. "They do that: sleep all the winter long and wake up hungry when it's warm."

"Oh," the boy said.

"Dig themselves right down into the snow and only come out when there's prey—food—about. ...They wake up to kill."

"Who does that?"

"Who?"

"Yeah. ...Not all things sleep and wake up to kill. The boar in the shed didn't sleep."

Jack Patrick's mouth formed into a smile and he agreed, the boy was correct. "They're predators," he said. "Predators wake and sleep and kill and wake up again."

"Do you think there's predators around us right now?"

With a little chuckle Jack Patrick replied he supposed

there may be. Then he asked where the two of them stood in relation to the homestead.

"We're a ways from the house," Nicholas said. "There's not much here."

"That's where the sleeping predators are. They hide in the quiet spaces. They wait for fools to come to them."

The boy began scraping at the layer of ice glazed on top of the snow with his boot heel. "So why were you a bounty man?"

Though it mattered not, Jack Patrick blinked and directed his eyes toward the scraping noise. "What of it?"

"I—I mean, you an' uncle Matt, Ma said you were bounty men, that you were hunters of men. You'd go out after men."

Crouching down so he could feel the substance of the snow with his bare hands, Jack Patrick nodded and answered by saying they needed to go back to the homestead. He gathered clumps of snow in his hands and rubbed it over his skin until it turned to melt. He clenched his fists together and stated it was time for Nicholas to learn about the nature of the hunt.

From the crest of the hill looking out over the shallows, Jack Patrick and his stepson lay in the snow.

They fetched the rifle clandestinely, without Marie or Elizabeth seeing them enter or leave the house again. Now the two males lay in the snow side by side.

"What do you see?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Nothing."

"There must be something there. Tell me what you see."

"Well..." The boy hesitated. "There's a lot of snow, real shiny like."

"Yeah."

"And I can see a tree—a couple of trees—over that a way. Over toward where the sun sets I mean."

"That's west."

"West."

"Good."

When the boy spoke again, his voice was small even amidst the largeness of the world. "Why're we here?" he asked.

"A good hunter does not chase down his prey. A good hunter knows his prey as well as he knows himself. He knows where his prey goes and what they do. If at the end of every day a creature walks a certain path, he is more likely to be killed in his routine than if he decided to

venture out a different way. Habits and community are the best ways to track prey."

"Are you talking about the bounties or animals?"

"Both."

"So those trees over there. Are they a community?"

"Yes. Creatures love living in things already made for them."

"And the animals there—"

"Squirrels," Jack Patrick said. "Squirrels nest in trees like that."

"The squirrels, what habits do they have that I can kill them for?" Jack Patrick laughed. "The animals aren't killed for their habits. The predator—that's us—just takes advantage of the habits. It makes the killing easier."

"Well, how do I know what a squirrel's habits are?"

"Everything worth killing has two things that they do: they eat and they sleep. Life outside of civilization consists of little else."

"Aren't we outside of civ—civilization?" "And our lives are not much more than that, are they?"

The Jack Patrick could hear the boy shivering.

"Tell you what," he said after the boy's teeth continued to chatter, "the best predators lure their prey to them. Let's go back home and we'll figure a way to get those animals to come to us."

Dinner had been prepared as usual by Elizabeth. Marie did not ask where her husband and son had gone, not even regarding it with a single comment. After they sat a grumbling of prayer followed, then the clatter of utensils and flatware.

"It smells delicious, misses," the stranger said.

Jack Patrick stopped. "You dinin' with us tonight, is that it?"

The din of mealtime lulled and ceased altogether. Only Isabelle continued making noise.

"Reckoned so," the stranger said. "I been dinin' with y'all a while now. —I'm just surprised to see you here, sir."

"An' why's that?"

"Well, you're usually not here. You're gone... elsewhere."

There was a silence a moment more and Jack Patrick began to eat again. His surrogate family did the same.

"Speaking of moving on," Jack Patrick said abruptly, "when will you?" Again, a sullen quiet ensued, save the youngest child.

"Figured it to be soon," the stranger said.
"'Specially with the melt—makes for better traveling."

"Traveling."

"That's what I do, sir."

"Sir."

"I can call—"

"I'd prefer you to not call me sir. I don't need your respect."

Marie began to admonish her husband, but he lifted his hand to silence her. The stranger made an intonation indicating he was going to speak, but stopped short.

"No," Jack Patrick said, "don't try to name me; just speak."

He resumed eating.

"Well, I am sorry," the stranger said.

"You said you traveled."

"Yes, that's right."

"Which way?"

"Which ever way the wind blows I suppose."

"Hm," Jack Patrick shoveled another spoonful of food into his mouth. "Where did the winds originate from?"

"Don't see—"

"Where did you come from?"

"Came from the east."

"Whereabouts?"

"App'lachia."

"Don't know it."

"Mountain country. Old country. Mountains older than the bible."

Jack Patrick took a sip from his mug, curling his lips back in over his teeth, sucking the moisture from them.

"We got mountains out here."

"Yeah, I seen 'em."

"So you been west of here?"

"That's right."

Marie called for the children to follow her and leave the table, but the children protested and all stayed seated at the table.

"You been all over then."

"I have, yes."

"And you're headin' north now."

"No."

"Where you going then?"

"Southward."

"So you already gone north."

"Yeah."

Now even the smallest of the children stayed silent in captivation. If there was movement, it was without sound.

Jack Patrick's voice broke from its usual flattened pitch, the words lifting into wistfulness. "What's it like?" he asked.

"Like any other place," the stranger said.

One of the children resumed eating.

"People are the same everywhere; land's always different though."

Jack Patrick nodded in agreement. "I got a brother up there."

"Me too."

"That so?"

"Yeah. Went our separate ways a while back, neither one of us wantin' particularly to settle down."

"A fight?" "Nothing like that," the stranger said. "Just decided to. We talked about it when we were out on the plains. We said if we ran into each other again, we'd

swap stories so it'd be more like we've seen the world entirely."

Almost inaudibly Marie commented how nice it would be to hear their stories.

"I think now if I ever caught up to him, I'd kill him," the stranger said.

Someone gasped.

"I know it," Jack Patrick said.

The conversation paused and everyone, except the two men, ate.

"Well, as I said, the land's different. Lot more snow up there. Whole big bunches of it," the stranger explained. Then he asked if Jack Patrick had ever been to the desert.

Jack Patrick said that he had.

"It's like that; snow like sand, constant and never-ending. Drifting in every direction. Sometimes there's these pockets and you think it's a house and you walk—slugging your feet up and down, postholing through the snow like a mule—and when you get close enough—"

"There's nothing there," Jack Patrick finished.

"Yes. That's right. It's just shadow. And other times—"

"—Other times the ground reflects the sun and you think it's a fire, someone else—"

"And when you get there, it's cold as ever," the man said. He slurped water from his mug. "Snow's blowing like the desert."

"How—how do you survive it?" Nicholas asked.

"You can't," Jack Patrick answered.

The stranger agreed. "You can try to walk as far as you can; melt, build, burrow, to get way. But the snow's still there, blowing out in front of you. It's faster than you. All those little flakes floating past you, piling up before you. ...You pass through them and they take off again. Sheets of it, whole sheets of this stuff fluttering out before you."

"Come on," Marie said and children only mildly protested as she ushered them away from the table.

iv.

When, in blindness he supposed it to be morning, Jack Patrick woke his stepson.

"Come," he said and roused the boy from slumber.

They did not eat when they left the house. And they did not speak, not to one another. They trudged through the

snow, with great glops of it sticking to their boots. When they were far from the house, several hundred paces removed and the boy without breath to pant or pray, did the false father speak.

"Notice if anyone was awake?" he asked.

"No," the boy gasped.

"Was our guest awake?"

"The drifter."

"Yes. Him. Was he awake?"

"You mean this morning or—"

"Yeah, this morning."

"I don't know. I didn't see him."

"Me neither."

Then the two stayed standing in silence, the snow melting where it clung to their clothes, leaving dark wet patches.

"If he left," the boy said, "there'd be tracks."

"Guess you're right," Jack Patrick said. He walked another few steps aimlessly and stopped.

"Are you coming?" Jack Patrick asked.

"Where are we going?"

Jack Patrick opened his jacket and withdrew the pistol. He did it quickly, then ceased all movement. He

opened his mouth wide so even his breath expelled from his vessel without sound. He listened for the boy's quick and shallowed breathing, his movements.

"It's a pistol," Jack Patrick said, and he raised the gun. With a single deft flick of his thumb the chamber popped open. Bullets plopped into the snow. The boy's footsteps approached.

"Where are we going?"

"Are the trees near here?" "'Bout another hundred feet yet."

"That's good," Jack Patrick said. The boy stood close to him, where the cool jet of exhaled fog curled and broke across the skin of Jack Patrick's face. He knelt, one leg down into the snow. Another supple crunch and the boy had done the same. Jack Patrick showed the innards of the gun to the boy.

"Here," he said, and gave the boy some bullets. "You know how to load these?"

Nicholas did not respond, but the series of light tapping sounds indicated the bullets were loaded.

"Now," Jack Patrick said slowly, "lay down in the snow like we did yesterday." And the boy did as he was told.

"Now look out over that grove of trees and tell me if you see anything move."

"I—I don't see anything," Nicholas said.

Jack Patrick took the gun from the child and snapped its facets back together and replaced it in the boy's hands.

"You seen one of these fired before?"

"Yeah. I saw my daddy shoot a man right between the eyes. ...But I ain't shot anything ever."

Then, in language too simple for babes or for idiots, Jack Patrick told the boy how to use the gun. When he was finished, he asked if the boy had any questions.

"How do you do it?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"The killin'."

Jack Patrick then lay supine in the snow next to his stepson and sighed. "Tell me when there's movement," he said, and he closed his eyes, though there could not be a difference, not ever again.

"There," the boy said and touched his stepfather's shoulder. "A squirrel's come down the trunk."

Jack Patrick opened his eyes and the vacant things stared out into emptiness. "Pull back the hammer," he instructed. He spoke again after he heard the click. "Now, slow boy, real slow, point the gun at the animal."

"Alright," the boy said.

"Open your mouth wide," Jack Patrick said. "It'll slow your breathing down, and it'll make the noise hurt less—when you fire the gun, I mean. ...Now aim; look right down the barrel there. Best if you use one eye."

"Alright," the boy said. "I got him. I got him standing still."

"What's he doing?"

"Eating. —He moved. Wait. ...He's eating again."

"Keep him aimed in your sight there."

"When do I shoot?"

"You won't," Jack Patrick replied. "Not at this one. Just watch what he does. Every creature in this world wakes and scavenges for food. He's no different. Just watch him, let him believe the world is safe, that this is what the rest of the planet is like. Then you'll kill him."

Several minutes of silence followed. Jack Patrick lay motionless, his jaw set open to dry the interior of his

mouth. Eventually the boy's body quaked and shivered and his breathing grew noisy and rattled. Then he fired.

"Did you get him?" Jack Patrick asked.

"No," the boy said and said it so his voice was small and distant.

Together the males slogged through the mushes of melt back to their shelter. As they approached the more trodden snows immediately surrounding the house, Nicholas stopped.

"He left," Nicholas said flatly.

"Who?"

"The visitor."

"How do you know?"

"His footprints, they're heading out of here, still fresh. ...Ma's looking out the window like she can still see him."

"Is he still that close? Is he within eyesight?"

For a moment the stepson looked around, then said he could see nothing except the footprints heading north out of the shallows.

VII

i.

Spring came on more quickly once all the snow melted. The ground which had lay dormant and solid for the past several months instantly softened into a bed of beaten grasses, reestablishing themselves in the new environment. Winds blew in more gustily, swirling into the shallows as miniature cyclones.

Without the consent of her husband, Marie left the homestead and rode into town to fetch the preacher-turned-doctor and gather some rations. And because he was the only healer in the town, he demanded all of the woman's money. She raised a small protest saying some of the money was for rations and the apothecary threatened to turn her away. She relented. So in the early spring, when mists from nearby storms often blew through even a warm day, Doctor-the-Former-Reverend came to the island homestead.

"There," Doctor-the-Former-Reverend said. He splashed a cold liquid into Jack Patrick's eye. The doctor sat close to Jack Patrick and his breath dried Jack Patrick's eye. "We'll let that set for a minute."

Jack Patrick sat staring out into a supposed nothingness, content with the ensuing silence.

"Been a while since I been out here," the doctor said.

"That right?"

"Well, I come out when you were still unconscious. You don't remember that. It was a hell of a lot colder then. I was afraid of getting stuck out here since those warm spells usually break fast and turned into blizzards. But your misses insisted. Time before that was in the spring."

"You came out to see the last people who lived here."

"Yes," Doctor-the-Former-Reverend said. "I was the one who found them."

There was another long silence, and like the last one, the doctor was the one to speak first.

"Can you see anything?" the doctor asked.

"Just shadows sometimes," he said and it was a lie.

"What about now?"

"Only shadow."

"Right," the doctor said and he creaked back in his chair. "That's too bad; it's a beautiful day outside."

Jack Patrick could feel his wife's presence in the room, her gaze set down upon him.

"The cane working out alright?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I've taken to calling it a shillelagh."

"Can't say I've ever heard it called that before."

Outside the children were playing. Isabelle was almost speaking now; her words were stumbling out, nearly formed. From where he sat the more distant voices of Nicholas and Elizabeth sounded the same.

"It was lucky, you making it home like you did."

"I don't remember coming home."

"Nothing?"

"No."

"What about the Indian?"

"What about an Indian?"

"You said when you were recovering an Indian brought you back. You were delirious then."

"The only Indian I knew was Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire from Aurora. He must've found me on his way back south."

"Marie was the one who found you."

Jack Patrick could hear his wife's breathing. Very faint and cold, he could feel it ruminating around him.

"But—"

"There wasn't any Indian, Jack." She said it so her voice broke on his name.

Doctor-the-Former-Reverend's hand rested on Jack Patrick's leg. "Perhaps more rest will help you restore your memory."

"I don't need restoration," Jack Patrick said. He rose and stumbled to where he suspected his wife stood.

"She left the room, Jack Patrick."

When Doctor-the-Former-Reverend was ready to leave, he arose from his chair and stopped. "Oh," he said, "I heard some news about that fella you used to ride with."

"He was my brother."

"Yes, him. Well, I guess he got promoted up to sheriff up there in St. John."

Jack Patrick let the news sit with him for a second and he heard it echo inside of himself, in the space where his vision once electrified into imagery, and said simply that he got what he deserved.

ii.

Slumber became a strange thing for Jack Patrick; he could not feel it come. At times, when he suspected only by the inherent coolness of darkness that it was night, he thought of the days tired from herding wild horses when his

vision blurred, his eyelids eclipsing his field of vision. Now he lived in darkness. The night, the slumbers he once fought hard, were vivid. But the new worlds he found in his dreams slowly gave way to memories recapitulated so he stood outside his body, watching himself clamber through peak-top storms. He mounted the summit where blinding crags of light splashed off the rocks, scorching the lichen. Great peals of thunder reveled across the bellies of the clouds. Then sharpened pops one after another like gunshots. Another illumination revealed the yearling, broken legged upon the alter of the peak. Jack Patrick watched himself move closer. The horse watched him too, its teeth exposed, eye wicked and wild in the webs electricity. There was a break in the thunder, a time when only the rain fell, and Jack Patrick witnessed the foreign figure of himself approach the beast, placing his hands on its wounded body. The horse brayed. An arc of lightning struck a nearby scrag grown out of a split rock and it remained aglow in flames. In the firelight the figure pushed the beast from the precipice, over the steep side of the mount, and it fell without sound. The figure turned to the burning tree. Precipitation already reduced the flames to embers. Beyond the storm, at the steppes of the mount, and now as

the clouds passed island to shallow vast waters, and on to the mainland, there was only silence.

When Jack Patrick awoke, he would not say amen.

"Come on, Daddy Jack." Nicholas was pulling at Jack Patrick's hand.

"Where are you taking us?" the step-father asked.

Jack Patrick walked with small steps, pauses between each one, down the stairs. He tested each one with his staff. The stairs did not creak, they did not give; the nails were fast in the wood and the construction was good.

Jack Patrick felt his skin alternate between a blanketed warmth and a piqued coolness. He knew the high and lofty clouds, ever-moving and rainless were blotting and revealing the sun.

Nicholas led him to the wagon. His hand guided Jack Patrick so he could hoist himself in. Nicholas climbed in next to his step father. Taking the reins, he told the horse to giddy up and they began to move. The wagon rattled behind the shackled beast. The smell of dung, of prairie grass, circulated about the two males.

"Where are you taking us?" the cowboy asked.

The boy laughed as a child does.

Jack Patrick could feel the ruts of the once traveled road reverberating in his body. The sun unmasked itself and he was warmed by it.

"To where are you taking us?" he asked a second time.

The boy continued to laugh and his laughter filled his step father's vision of darkness.

The wagon came to a stop some time later. It was evening. Jack Patrick could feel the air relieved of its thickness. A new wispieness cleared his nostrils.

"It'll dew tonight," he said. "I can taste it in the air."

"Taste it?"

"Yeah. It's kind of sweet, like spring water."

Nicholas was behind the wagon, unloading their cargo.

"How ever far we've come today," Jack Patrick said, "we won't be able to make it back tonight."

"I know," Nicholas said. "I told Ma we'd be out tonight. She said it was alright."

The boy grabbed another bundle of gear and it rattled strangely.

"You brought the fishing poles," Jack Patrick said.

"Yeah, the lake is over about a hundred yards."

"The lake?"

"Devil's Lake."

"Oh."

"Ma said you'd like to go fishing; said you hadn't eaten fish in a while."

"She's right. I used to eat a lot of fish."

"Is it alright if we go fishing now, do some night fishing?"

Jack Patrick blinked and smiled. "Yeah, let's do that."

In the darkness, Nicholas could only hear the steady ripple of the line cutting through the air. Somewhere in the abyss, the baited hook sank. Jack Patrick was somewhere next to him; his line also hissed and dropped upon the water silently. They did not speak, and when there was a tug on the line, there was a distant thrashing felt only by the fisherman.

"Nicholas," Jack Patrick whispered.

"Yeah?"

"I got one... a big one."

Nicholas bent beneath the branches of the tree. The curled and brittle leaves scratched at his face. He came to

Jack Patrick and knelt. His hands searched for the fish. It flapped in the dirt and its scaled skin was cool and supple, writhing with life as it suffocated in the open air. The gills, cut like knife-slit apertures opened and closed rhythmically, ever-slowng. Nicholas ran his hand over the fish's body a second time and its scales were growing sticky. The eye of glass like beaded water unblinked. It shook less.

"Can we put it back?" Nicholas asked.

Jack Patrick did not answer. He removed the hook from its mouth. The fish languored on the ground.

"Are we going to put him back?" Nicholas asked.

"No," Jack Patrick said. "This is our meal."

iii.

The two fished all of the next day and into the early afternoon. They built a small pyre and cooked the fish in its skin.

"Here," Nicholas said and gave Jack Patrick a small burlap bag.

"What is it?"

"Ma made a seasoning for the fish."

Jack Patrick rubbed the seasoning into the fish and stuffed it into the agape mouth. When the fish was cooked, it would be steamed over cloves and peppercorn and sea salt. They would sleep the late noon before riding home.

Because they had slept late into the day, the two males were forced to stop at nightfall and form another makeshift camp. The boy went about unfurling the tarpaulin for their knapsacks and gathered what he could of firewood and kindling. Once the pile amounted to a small bracken, Jack Patrick knelt by it and lit it into a blaze with a single match. Warmth spread rapidly. Heat wafted out on the waves of smoke.

"Is it catching all right?"

The boy said it was and asked his stepfather if they could stay up for a while.

"Yeah." Jack Patrick directed his eyes to where he felt the blaze to be and sat by the fire's edge.

"Can you tell me a story?" Nicholas asked.

"Afraid I don't have anything new to tell you."

"But you've been all over. Can't you just tell me about the places you've been to? You've gotta have some

more stories from other parts." "Won't matter," Jack Patrick said.

"Why not?" "Why what?"

"You said it won't matter. Why won't it matter?"

Pulling his knees up to his chest, Jack Patrick tilted his head back, sighed and pretended to study the filament above. "It's just the same story over and over again. You can have a whole different cast of characters, complete strangers from all different parts themselves, travelers, thieves, preachers, old and young. Blind. Women. ...Risen dead men; it doesn't matter. And they can be anywhere, traveling through the whole universe. Could have been a hundred years ago, before people like us came about and the people here were called savages. It could be tomorrow and it could be us.

"The story is the same."

The boy managed to reply a weak, "Oh," to show he was still there.

"...It's just that," and Jack Patrick settled back onto his haunches and stared unblinking into the fire, "—It's just that the whole world looks so big when you're in one place at one time. —And it is big. But everything in it is small. People and their problems are small. The biggest

towns are small. If you walked the earth for a thousand years, you still couldn't see everything there is in it and by the time you did see everything, you'd have to start over to keep up with the changes because when you go from one place to the next, the last place you saw will change. Trying to see the earth in its entirety is a punishment people inflict on themselves for atonement."

"What's atonement?" the boy asked.

But his stepfather did not stop speaking; he disregarded the question and continued on his course of speech. "You can see everything the world has in one vision. Everything is just a variation on that one thing."

"What thing is it?" the boy asked.

"What I can offer you is a story told to me by another man." "Your brother—Uncle Matt?"

Jack Patrick laughed, saying the characters in that story would have very little variation between them.

"Whose story is it then?"

"Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire, the Indian. ...I'm not certain if the story makes a lick of sense. He was an Indian after all and their type rarely speak so they can rightly understood, but I'll tell you the best I can."

Nicholas said it was all right and laid down into the grasses.

"The Indian said he'd walked into—"

The boy interrupted. "That's not how you tell a story."

"What do you mean?"

"When you tell a story, you say it like it actually happened to you."

"I do?"

"Yes. It makes it more believable."

After a moment of consideration, Jack Patrick began telling the story again.

"I dreamed of a village and I wandering through it, amongst the people and they couldn't see me. Like a ghost, or a spy. All the people in this village were going to the same place; they were congregating at the watering hole near the center of town. The water they drew out of the well was clear like rain water and cold enough to make your teeth hurt. They carried the water to their gardens in goblets—that's like a cup thing—and they poured it on their crops and the plants grew instantly and bore fruit. But the people of this village were not like you and me, and they

were not like Paul His-Tongue-Is-On-Fire; instead they were in-between, like the woman Matt took on to St. John."

"St. John?" the boy asked. His voice was sharp and said the city's name like a curse.

"Yes."

"That's where you and Uncle Matt were headin'—to St. John?"

"That's right."

"That's where my dad is, that's where we were going before we met you."

"Your dad left you, went off gambling."

"But you brother went on. He went to St. John. Did he meet my dad?"

"I don't know."

"And you kept us here."

Heat from the fire had faded and only pulsed with small bursts of warmth.

"Yes," Jack Patrick finally said. "The story'd be the same no matter where we went."

When the males returned to the homestead, they found it much as they had left it. Neither the man nor the boy spoke when they walked through the front door. The house

was quiet. Somewhere the infant was pattering barefoot across the floor. Jack Patrick called out his wife's name. The only response came from Elizabeth, saying her mother was ill.

"How's that?" Jack Patrick asked.

"She done fell ill," Elizabeth said evenly. "Happened when the youngin... when Isabelle—" Elizabeth's voice broke off and she began sobbing.

"What happened?" Jack Patrick asked.

Nicholas pushed past Jack Patrick and bounded up the stairs.

"You left a pistol out," Elizabeth said between sobs. "Ma and I was tendin to the horses... readyin them to go into town."

Suddenly the floor under Jack Patrick felt like it might be moving. He braced himself against a wall.

"We heard the sound and ran," Elizabeth said. She gagged on her tears. "When we got in here, there wasn't no need to call for the doctor."

VIII.

i.

St. John was not as Matt had left it. The town had grown, become more prosperous. Lines of wire, once single strung, now cabled in from each compass direction, swagging peaks and bowls between poles made from raptured trees. Sets of rails now converged, leading into the center of commerce, an open street lined with stores and vendors.

It was evening and the better part of St. John had settled in to the night. Lights came on in a few windows. Most of the homes now existed on the periphery of the populace. Still, the rutted mud of the streets guided Matt into the town as they had seasons ago. The mare he'd come to acquire needed direction to navigate the inroads. Matt steered the horse while he looked at the new growths of civilization. He told the horse to hold up when he came to the old sodhouse bar. He dismounted and entered the establishment. Long slats of wood covered the walls so no one could tell the place had been built as a part of the earth itself.

"Evening," the bartender said.

"Only 'round here," Matt said. He leaned on the bar. "I'll have a whiskey."

"Need you to pay up front," the barkeep said. "Been havin' a problem with folks thinkin' they can get their fill an' pay later."

"Understand," Matt said and placed a single coin on the counter.

Once he had his drink in hand, an old timer, who had been sitting in the corner of the bar, sidled up next to Matt.

"He never does that to regulars," the man whispered.

The barkeep's eyes darted toward the old man, then back to his busy work—stocking the shelves and cleaning glasses.

"Well, if the passer-throughs are the ones stiffing—"

"They aren't. It's the ones here who aren't paying their dues." Matt sipped his whiskey and it burned in the chapped cracks of his lips. "Surprised to hear it."

"Squatters don't know their responsibilities."

"Thought your mayor would do something about it."

The old man laughed a dry laugh, some phlegm spackling his throat. He knocked on the counter for another drink.

When the barkeep sat the glass down, the old man still chuckled, saying to the barkeep that this one must not know our mayor.

"I've heard of him," Matt said, "a man named Roar. Been mayor for some time now. Never had to run against any opponents."

"Yeah," the man said, "neither of them."

"How's that?" "Neither of them. Him or his uncle."

A moment passed wherein both of the men did not take their eyes from the other, but only drank. When the moment had passed, Matt asked if the older of the mayor Roars was deceased.

"Yessir," the man said. "Died this last winter. Died sudden, in his sleep."

"And his nephew took his place."

"That's right. —You know an awful lot for—"

"Rolfo's his name."

"Yeah."

Matt finished his drink and shook his head. "Didn't think Roar could die."

"All men die."

Matt rose to leave and said, "Unless they are not men at all."

Rolfo did not recognize the former sheriff of the town when he answered the door. Winter changed Matt's

appearance; his skin was ruddy and patched with scales of eczema. Wild and streaked, his beard was cropped flat across the bottom.

"I knew your uncle," Matt said. "I was a partner of his."

"He never had a partner. He was mayor," Rolfo said.

"No," Matt shook his head. "I was sheriff here."

Cursing under his breath, the younger Roar recalled the name of the exiled sheriff and spoke it aloud.

"Come in," he said.

They sat in the living room, in the same manner Matt had sat with this man's uncle.

"You weren't supposed to come back," Rolfo said.

"I know it."

"He let you go when you should have been hanged."

Again Matt nodded in agreement. Then they sat in silence, waiting for the other to speak, to make a gesture of some sort. Nothing came and they stayed seated and spoke plainly instead.

"The town is mostly different."

"It's bigger than it used to be with the trains and the telegraph and all."

"I saw that. ...Is there law around here?" "Not a lawman. Some deputies and rifles, but no sheriff."

"None since me."

"My uncle told the people you were still around, that you'd return if you were needed. -He told me the truth."

"I don't have to be here," Matt said. "I can go. There's other places I can stay."

Rolfo shook his head slowly back and forth. "Perhaps my uncle was right and you returned when you were needed."

"I was hoping to deal with your uncle."

"You have me instead."

Matt shifted in his chair and it creaked. "I want to stay here."

"In St. John?"

"Yes."

"That's difficult."

"How's that?" Rolfo stood up from his chair and strode across the room to the credenza where the liquor was kept. He took out the sole bottle and drank directly from the spout.

"You'll get no problem from me," he said. "But I'll only be mayor so long."

Matt nodded. The chair creaked.

"Because I wasn't elected, there's another party calling for a special election; they want to run against me. Say I'm part of a legacy and this isn't old Britain."

Matt looked to the floor where his feet rested in the rotting leather of his boots. "Who is it?" "Man who runs a brewery here in town called The Thirsty Fish. Man's name is Mallory."

"Anyone else interested in being mayor?" "None that I know of. Probably won't be any after Mallory."

"There's always someone else," Matt said.

"No," Rolfo replied. "That's why I have you."

ii.

Although the mayor offered Matt a bed in the house, Matt declined. When Rolfo then offered to finance a whore and a room at the inn, Matt refused. He asked if anyone was sleeping in the jail. Rolfo said the jail was vacant now, had been for a while.

"I'd like to sleep there," Matt said.

And there he slept on a bench in the cell until the bars threw shadow stripes across the room.

And when he dreamed, he dreamt of Utah—the dried ocean beds with rocks littering the floor like fossilized fish. The current winds blowing vacantly. He wandered solitaire, without his brother and without the man of the cloth. He thought he spied the holy man, but in turning to look, he saw it was only his own miscast shadow. The island—distant as it was—felt near to the man. Though the skies were blank and unblemished without the scabs of clouds, the looming haze of sprites awaited, beyond where the rocks high and furrowed hacked the skyline. The horse he rode upon came to rest. With its respite—and the beast ceased to breathe—the desert amplified, blaring a blistering silence. The wanderer, he labored his own breathing in an effort to break the silence—to restart the currents of air—to prove that he himself was still among the living.

He looked out the opposite horizon—the one pulled flat and even, the one at equilibrium with the emptiness above. Squinting his eyes, he scanned it for an oasis; even a hallucination he could pretend to journey towards. But none appeared. There were no visions here.

Morning came again as it had before: a welcomed intrusion on the night. For breakfast Matt consumed a

scanty mishmash of breadcrusts and scraps of previous meals eaten and left to mold in the jailhouse. Half-evaporated sludge of coffee left in a tin cup provided for his thirst. He still did not shave, nor did he wash. He simply wandered out onto the streets of St. John. Some of the denizens he lived among a year before passed him by without regard. He appeared as just another passer through, a gaunt and worn figure swaying down the paths, the hard-packed paths carved in the earthen streets.

Spotting The Thrifty Fish, he staggered in.

"Hey there, fella,"

Matt nodded to the bartender.

"It's a little early."

"It's all right," Matt said. "Double whiskey."

"Thing is," the bartender said. He leaned, knuckles down on the bar, "I gotta know you're good for it."

Without looking up, Matt dug into his pockets and set a small stack of coins on the counter. He instructed the man to leave the bottle of the finest house whiskey and the man did so.

Some time passed before Mallory came downstairs.

"Big spender there," he said.

Matt sipped at the grog glassed before him.

The man sat next to Matt, looking at the stranger—the lack of hat on his head, the skin exposed where clothes should have covered him, the pistol cradled in the raggedy straps of the holster.

"You're new here in town."

Matt didn't answer.

"I've been here near eight months," the man continued, "got my stakes made out. Plannin' on bringing the rest of the family out this way. ...And I always got my eye out for investors.... Men who might not know what to do with their money."

"I like your whiskey," Matt said.

"Got yourself a bottle of house blend."

"That's right."

"It's a little secret recipe I brought—"

"Does it got honey in it?" "...No, can't say it does."

"Had a whiskey—a dark, hard one—with honey in it once."

"Sounds good."

"Brewed by a devil of a man."

"Well, y'got to give the devil his due."

Though the sockets of Matt's eyes looked like raw bitten holes, his vision was not clouded; he could see Mallory for what he appeared to be.

"Whereabouts did you find such a whiskey?" Mallory asked.

"South of here."

"Ashley? Mound City? Leola?"

"Farther south. Nebraska."

"You've come a long way," the man said and poured Matt another glass of the elixir.

"Came further than that."

"And you rode alone?" Matted nodded. "Yeah."

"Lots of dangerous land between here and—where are you from originally?"

"I'm here now," Matt said. He looked over the man in his fine haberdasheries. "That's what you should be concerned with."

Angus Mallory lived out from town in a small homestead. At the end of the business day, when his establishment grew rowdier and lawless, he went home. He rode his horse on the open trail scythed through the tall grasses. Matt waited for him at the bend in the trail.

Since there was no coverage, Mallory saw the cowboy well in advance. Matt spied the man pat the side of his jacket to ensure his possession of a firearm.

"Hello, there," he called. But Matt stayed saddled and still on his steed. Mallory paused for a moment and continued to approach. When they were close enough to talk, the man said he was glad to see Matt again—for he needed to return what Matt had overpaid him at the bar.

"All right," Matt said and drew his pistol and shot the man dead.

iii.

"You did a fine job," Rolfo said.

Matt nodded. He walked about the living room.

"I can give you a house; you won't have to purchase it."

"No."

"Money?"

Again Matt told his host he did not want compensation.

"Sit," Rolfo said, but Matt continued to pace.

"Imagine if this could be all yours. I inherited it from the old goat before me."

Matt looked around the quarters. It was furnished much the same as it always had been: small and slightly shambled, dirty dishes on the table, the metronome of the grandfather clock.

"I could've had all this at one point in time," Matt said.

"That so?"

Matt stood by the window, looking out past the backwards-cast visions and into the piercing darkness, where light from other places only glowed faintly.

"Why don't you sit and have a drink, a drink with the mayor—the mayor now and forever more?" And with that, Matt opened the door and wandered out into the night.

IX.

i.

The whores at the inn were different now. They wore frilled dresses adorned with puffs of cotton balls and strips of ribbon, sashes of toile. Their undergarments pushed their breasts up so they bulged at the neckline of their dresses. A lot of the women wore paint on their eyes and flushed their cheeks with powder. The whore Matt selected dressed simply and shuffled among the others as if

she did not know whether she was sleepwalking through her existence or not. He took her to the upstairs room, paying to keep her the whole night. She undressed herself easily, just removing one free-flowing layer of her gown.

"I ain't done this long," the girl said. "I'm still fresh. Haven't had a man in a couple days now. Guess I'm not most men's type. Ain't got the chest for it."

Matt sat on the bed and pulled off his boots. The sheets were rough in spots and gauzed in between.

"I kin undress ya. I got a soft touch."

"No," Matt said and he unfastened his gun belt and removed the pistol, rotating the chambers around.

"I know there ain't much up top on me, but I make up for it." The girl's voice began to waver.

The gun, tarnished and scarred about the muzzle with streaks of carbon, lay flat in Matt's open hand. The patches of metallic shone unevenly, shades of gold and silver, in the low lamplight of the brothel room.

"Come here," Matt said and the girl approached. She smelled fresh, like she had said. She was like sunflowers.

Matt extracted all but a single bullet from the pistol. Then he handed the gun to the girl. It looked oversized in her hands, a brooding blunt instrument

proffered to the nearest thing to a virgin in this world. She asked him what he wanted her to do with it. But he only sighed and she kept it with her as she curled up next to the man. She rubbed his chest through the front of his shirt, feeling the scars etched in his skin.

"Bin everywhere, haven't you?"

"Yeah."

"Bin with a lot of women too." "...Yeah."

"Tell me how you did 'em. If they was good."

With one arm, Matt held the naked girl so her breathing became strained; he could feel her hand still clenched around the pistol. He whispered in her ear and told her about the women he'd lain with, what he called them, what he did to them. He laughed and recited their prayers as incantations to a god that never was. He hissed in wicked whispers about the infection of women in his body, how he'd tried to purge them, same as the fluids from a gangrenous wound. Then he told her about how he left the women and the condition in which they must have been discovered.

Breaking free from his grasp, the girl stood and leveled the pistol at Matt and pulled the trigger. The gun only clicked. A guttural surge of bloodlust rose from

inside the tiny form. She hefted the pistol above her head with both hands, until her breasts pulled tight and flat against her chest, the ribs protruding. She wielded the pistol downward on her customer with such force his laughter was cut into silence with only a yelp before going limp.

The accounts had to be settled regarding the whore. Matt understood this. He met with the whore's owner in the jailhouse.

"Sheriff Martin," the man said and removed his hat.

Matt bolted the door behind his guest and limped over to the desk.

"It's my understanding, sir, that you—"

Matt interrupted. "You're name is Adams. You own the whore?"

"Well, yes. You called me here to settle—"

"I called you here because you saved me and now you want paid for it."

Adams rubbed his moustache. "Yes; let's not charade. I think you owe me a handsome sum for the trouble you've caused."

The swollen side of Matt's mouth grew stiffer in what Adam's construed was a smile. He smiled a broad grin himself, revealing a golden canine tooth.

"What about my face?" Matt asked.

"I paid to have the wounds dressed. Put you up in my inn until you had your wits back about you."

"But it was your whore who did this to me."

There was no denying Matt's disfigurement. His right cheek swelled pink and shiny, while his left cheek sank puckered into the spot where his teeth had been knocked out. A patch of his scalp had been shaved back to properly sew the split of skin above his hairline. Beginnings of scar tissue brightly colored a stripe diagonally down to where a slit in the engorged flesh marked his eye.

Adams agreed; his whore had done this.

"Then I'm going to charge her with trying to kill an officer of the law."

The statement caused Adams to chuckle. "She told me why she did it," he said. "She told me about what you told her."

"I could have your business shut down."

"I could have you branded, sheriff. I could have you branded as a renegade, not fit to uphold the law. You were

outside the law before you came here and now you're pretending to preserve order here." Adams laughed aloud. "There never was any law, any order to anything, here."

"I brought justice with me," Matt said. "Your mayor sent me away—"

"You sent yourself away. Some may not recognize you as the being you were, but I do." Matt leaned forward in his chair and rested his elbows on the desk. He laced his fingers together and rested them gingerly on his chin. "I think it'd be best if we keep quiet about this whole ordeal," he said. "Let one crime cancel the other's sin."

"Give me ten dollars too," Adams said.

ii.

No one mentioned their sheriff's disfigurement in public. If it was discussed, it was spoken of only in private. Rumors started; some saying it was the result of a bounty mission he'd gone on. Another man said he heard from another source, the sheriff had tracked down his own brother and they duked it out somewhere south of here. Sheriff Martin, he said, beat his own brother to death with his fists. His physical appearance, the scarring and swollenness, instilled a fear into the people of St. John.

Speculation, fueled by Matt's absence, circulated behind the closed doors of the town.

Such speculations were only further perpetuated by Matt's conspicuous absence in the lighted hours. Rarely did the sheriff leave the jailhouse in the daytime. He governed his deputies without justification: giving orders, but no explanations; speaking to the mayor in riddles when the two of them met, and never answering questions directly. Neither the deputies nor the mayor asked Matt how his wounds were healing. Their speeches to each other were artificial, stripped down to a framework devoid of content. Governmental work and maintaining the letter of the law ran contrary to each other, and converged at the jailhouse.

Most nights one could see the sheriff sitting at his desk, leafing through various documents, studying sketches of wanted men and checking the weaponry. Then, just before daybreak, when the night men and women settled down, and the early risers had yet to rise, he made himself a drink, leaned back in his chair and slipped into lugubrious slumber.

Sleep came upon him as it never had before and blanketed him like the winters blanketed the lands of the north. In his sleep he dreamt of foreign places—images of

home, of the island and their hovel, of Hector the fool, of the skyline spilling out and puddling around the base of the mountains. He saw his brother, but even he was a changed man. The seasons had not shown mercy on him. And when Matt called his name, Jack Patrick wandered on intrepidly, walking as a wraith in the twilight.

The dreams, though cleared from Matt's memory upon awakening, continued to haunt him throughout his days. He paused to study nonsense symbols: smashed stubs of cigarillos, a boot print in the dust of the floor. Failing to concentrate properly, he would drink. Drunkenness led to further slumber. So he drank and so he slept as a damned captive, forced to cycle back into the cavity of existence every night.

Daylight infiltrated his dreams. The figures in his mind cast shadows from the glare of the sun-turned-glow behind the skin of his eyelids. He had dreamt of the north again. Only it snowed and when the snow hit his flesh, he bled and the blood fell down from his body, naked and frostbitten, as rain to the earth. And where the rain pooled, bramble and scrub scorched into cremation flourished. Only when the sunlight shone did he realize it

was he indeed who bled and only then did the plants mark their presence with shadows.

The breath of his waking was hardened whiskey. Hot copper, the taste of life within, oozed from the cracked tooth. His pistol lay out on the table, its bullets strewn out as unborn death. Some had rolled to the floor. The pistol sat gutted, the entrails of the chamber exposed, the hammer dislocated and ready to snap back into place. Outside the town chugged on; the 11:07 had just passed through, announcing itself with a shrill scream of white steam.

One of the deputies opened the jailhouse door. He came in with two prisoners and swore at them, told them to shut their mouths.

"Sit," the deputy told the two shackled prisoners. They sat. He waited for Matt to groan a response. "I have the two who robbed that bank down in Ross."

Matt barely parted the skin of his eyelids; the sliver of penetrating light cauterized his eyes. "Put them in cell one."

"Sir..."

Matt parted his eyes and saw the prisoners: one a man, the other a female.

"Split them up—one in each cell."

The two prisoners kissed sloppily before being pried apart by the deputy. Then they cussed and swore. They called the sheriff and deputy motherless sons of mules and spat on them. Matt did not stir.

"You want me to take care of 'em, sheriff?" the deputy asked. He began to pull his pistol from its holster.

"No, not now," Matt grunted. "They'll be good and hanged by tomorrow."

The hammer clicked back down on the deputy's pistol and it sopped back down into its holster. "Sure, sheriff," he said and he left.

The light slitting Matt's eyes open now widened the gap. He studied the criminals, two young souls, covered in dirt. The man, a husky sort, could not have been older than twenty. Whether the woman was a whore or not did not matter; she was beautiful despite the smears of dirt across her face and neckline.

"You're Sheriff Martin of St. John?" the one asked.

Blood pulsed in the temples of Matt's head when he sat up and his vision coursed over with patches of darkness. "Yeah," he said and pawed for the loose bullets on the table.

"You're gonna hang us then? Y'gotta reputation, a name for yourself... among thieves."

Matt fumbled a couple of bullets into the hollow chambers and clapped the chamber shut. He swallowed the blood that had begun to pump from the fractured tooth.

iii.

Dinner for Matt consisted of bread and fruits preserved and processed beyond recognition in glass jars with waxen seals and ringed with strings. The meal for the prisoners differed none from the sheriff's supper. He sat outside their cells and they gathered where the iron bars conjoined. An overturned crate served as their common table and they reached freely through the bars to pass the salt shaker.

"Robbed a bank?" Matt asked. Bits of his shoddily made sandwich flecked from his lips.

"Yeah, that's right," the man said between bites of his own sandwich. He scratched his gut with his free hand.

The woman picked at the crust of her bread and ate the portions from between her fingertips, "Did it down in Ross."

"Yeah."

They continued eating and the woman drank so the water from her cup dribbled out the side and trickled in a long line like a bulging vein pumping down to her breasts.

"How'd you get caught?" "Funny story," the woman said. She had not wiped the water from her skin and it glistened where it had run.

"We pulled off the robbery just fine, no hitches," the man said. "They say we robbed a bank in Ross, but truth is Ross is too small of a place to have a bank of its own. They got themselves a payroll wagon for the rail line they's puttin' in there. Gotta pay the intermittent types—"

"Itinerants."

"Yeah, them. So the rail company goes an' outfits a stagecoach, made it into a little rolling fortress bank, metal clad. Could be pulled by a team of draft horses or toted along the rail line. Guarded by a couple of railroad men, hired guns operating in the jurisdiction of the rail company."

"So how'd you rob them?"

"We killed the men," the woman said. She smiled. "Shot them while they was locked up inside their stagecoach. Shot them right through the bars when we went to get our payroll."

Matt stopped eating. "But they were inside."

"Yeah," the woman said.

"And everything was locked."

"Yeah," the man said. "We took off outta there with the stagecoach, the dead sons of whores locked inside. Them and the cash."

"Then how'd you get in there?" The man wagged his finger at the sheriff and told him to have patience, he was getting to that part of the story.

"We couldn't very well roll into a town and ask a locksmith to kindly open the stagecoach full of rotting corpses and stolen goods."

The woman interrupted and continued telling the story. "So we end up snaking all over creation, avoiding every town, every sign of civilized life and staying on the most treacherous trails. We had horses dying from being overworked, and he'd have to ride on one of the remaining draft horses into a settlement somewhere and steal us some more horses, any type he could get his hands on. And during one of those side trips—"

"I came upon a little holy town, all the folks attending this church, called the Church of the Holy Sacrifice. Place without liquor or gambling or whoring.

Everyone there was starved for it. And I happen to run into this man who happens to be a locksmith."

"—He happened to run into him by going into his shop."

"Yeah, well, I figured it was worth seeing if this was a man who lived there because he believed in the laws, or if he was just stuck there. ...Older fella, mustached and wearing a bowler cap, dressed in green. I give him some of the whiskey from my flask and that's all it takes before he's asking me if I know where he can get a fresh whore. Hadn't had a woman since his wife passed on."

"So I was offered," the woman said. She smiled more broadly after saying this and her teeth showed and she moved the morsel of bread around her mouth with her tongue.

"C'mon," the man said and reached through the bars between them and stroked her bare leg. "I didn't let him get a hand on you."

"But he did have me run a bit of a peep show for the old fart."

"Had to get him to pick the lock." "That's how you got him to pick the lock—with her?" Matt asked.

"Yeah, we got him out there, gave him a peep show and said if he could open the coach up, he could have her—"

"He told him I was just some whore thrown in a barter deal near Indian territory.."

"To tell it like it happened, I never seen a man get a lock open faster than that old codger did."

The two outlaws laughed, the one with a mouth still full of food, the other still pecking away at the wafer of bread.

"And you didn't let the man near her at all and he ended up reporting you," Matt concluded.

"No, no," the man said and he giggled with more chuckles and stroked his woman's leg.

"No," the woman said, "we shot him as soon as the lock popped open."

"Yeah, we emptied out the cash boxes and stuffed the money in our saddle bags, our pockets, anywheres we thought it might fit. There was a lot of it... lot of cash. Then we thought about leaving the wagon there, leave behind the bodies and the mess. Couldn't really burn it down, being made of iron. We thought better of the whole ordeal and hitched up our horses and took back to the trails again. The same thing as before: avoiding rail lines, major trails and not building fires at night."

"Got cold too. We weren't gonna sleep in the coach with the dead and all."

Matt nodded his head.

"Farther we went the more it felt like we were being followed. Like a marshal, or a posse of the locksmiths buddies were right at our heels."

"We just kept going," the woman said. "We traveled through the night, thinking we could stay ahead of it."

"Then the horses started dying again."

"They all died in the space of a week. Probably exhaustion."

"We were left with this damned pack mule we had neglected along the way. It was the only thing left to pull us."

The woman and the man did not smile. They cast their gazes far out; they focused not on one thing present, but many things past.

"Then we met a man with a run of horses, older fella, said his name was Saul. Said he was an outlaw himself, a horse thief, and he figured us to be outlaws too given the stagecoach with the rail company emblem on it and all."

"Did you kill him too?" "Should have. He said he could take us to where we could get rid of the coach inconsciously—"

"Inconspicuously."

"Yeah, that. He says there's a watering hole filled with bad water, a place no one goes and it's full of quicksand. 'Just push the coach on it,' he says. 'No one will ever see it again. That sand it goes straight into the center of the earth.' So instead of doing him in right there and taking the horses, we follow him into a trap."

"A bounty man."

"Yeah, a cock sucking bounty bastard. We come around this bend in an arroyo and there stands a militia of men—some law, some not, and Saul pulls out his pistol all casual like and says his name's not Saul and we're gonna hang for what we done."

"For the killings?"

"No. Haven't you listened? He never saw the inside of the coach, he only helped us tote it around as evidence. No one knew that's where we kept the evidence of the killings."

"They took us to Carrington-proper first—the town where the wagon was based out of—but they didn't have gallows there and then they brought us here."

"So far as we know we're still only charged with the robbery."

Matt shook his head. He had not eaten all of his sandwich, and he took it, broke it and gave each half to his captives. "Is there anything else?" "What else is there?" the woman asked.

"Anything else you want to tell me. If there are more crimes you committed and haven't told anyone."

"No," the man said, his speech garbled by a mouthful of food.

The sheriff looked to the woman and she too said there was nothing left.

iv.

When he was not himself and the jailhouse had grown dusky, Matt arose from his cot. In their cells the prisoners slept, their bodies heaving the deep breaths of the comatose. Whatever the dream had been, it left Matt now, and all that remained was his lack of vision in this world. His pupils dilated. He rubbed his eyes. He searched

the shadows for comfort and saw his captives. The form of the woman became clearer; she slept prone, her breasts undulating, her lips parted, one leg dangling from the bedside. Her skin appeared mulatto in the darkness.

Matt quietly unlocked her cage and let himself in. under the delicate skin of her eyelids, her eyeballs flicked back and forth. Gently, Matt removed her undergarments from beneath her dress. He closed his eyes and kissed her so his tongue ran along the sharp edge of teeth. As if drowsy himself, he murmured—he called her by names not her's. In the adjoining cell, her man continued to sleep and neither party—the sheriff nor the woman—made noise to wake him back into this world.

The night was without breeze and it was not hot and it was not cool. The night simply was. At one point in time the sight of a lone wanderer in the streets caused the citizens of St. John to turn up their lamp lights and lay waking in their beds. Such a time no longer existed. Now men roamed the streets, untethered horses might trample across the town baying for water at the dried troughs. Women on the balcony of the inn called down to the pestilent men below and smoked skinny cigars.

Matt walked in the shadows of the street not because folkways demanded so, but did so for familiarity. He circumvented most of the town, traveling in the alleyways and arrived before the lumber frame of the gallows. Two lengths of rope dangled from the cross beam. Since there was no breeze, the ropes did not move. Precautions had been taken in days passed to keep others from using the gallows for unofficial lynchings. But Matt had since relaxed the rules and the moving parts—the trapdoor and the operating lever—were left unlocked. He mounted the gallows. Somewhere in the farther reaches of town, laughter bellowed. Dogs barked from out on the prairie. Matt centered himself on the square cut out in the planks of wood for the trapdoor. Without touching the rope itself, he dipped his head through the halo of rope tied into a noose. He cleared his throat. He reached for the lever to release the trapdoor. Even a small push would throw the lever. He leaned forward until the rope held his weight and the knot began to slide taut. He took gasped breaths and strained to reach the lever. His fingers outstretched and he leaned forward some more, the weave of the rope cutting into the skin on his bare neck. His weight shifted to the toes of his boot, but to no avail: the lever was too far away.

He coughed, stood upright and loosened the rope from around his neck. He rubbed the raw stripe it had made. Then he took two paces toward the lever and pulled it back. The trapdoors flopped open—two black squares in the planked floor. And Matt remarked to himself how simple this would be if there were two of him.

Matt spent some time staring into the void under the stage and when he broke his stare, his sights turned to the nearest of burning lights—Mayor Roar's homestead. Behind the veils of curtains Matt could see the silhouette of Rolfo moving about.

Rolfo did not act surprised to see Matt appear on his doorstep. And he did not react when Matt invited himself into the house and stood in the living room. Instead he spoke banalities until his guest interrupted.

"Do you know where I came from?" Matt asked.

"How about I get us some coffee?" Rolfo said. He started across the room for the stove.

"No." Matt shook his head and unbuttoned his long, worn coat so the butt of his pistol protruded. "Let's sit," he said and the men sat.

"Your uncle and me sat like this." "Did you?" "It was before I was sent away."

Rolfo did not look up at his visitor, his eyes remained downcast, staring at the weathered boots of the man across from him. But Matt did not blink, his eyes remained steady and intent on his subject.

"Do you know where I came from?" Matt asked.

"Up north."

"No," Matt said, "my origin. Where I came from before I came to the Dakota Territory."

"I've heard rumors," Rolfo said.

"Tell me some."

Running his hand over the slick of hair on the back of his neck, Rolfo stammered, but formulated no speech.

"I want to hear a story," said Matt.

"All right." Rolfo leaned his elbows on his knees. "I heard you had a brother you traveled with and you killed him over a woman."

"Hm."

"I—I don't think that's true though. I'd also heard—I'd heard you came in on a train and were a fraud. That you'd never killed anyone."

Matt slid his pistol out of the holster. He flipped the chamber open, letting the bullets sprinkle out across the floor, the projectiles coming to rest in the planked gaps.

"Go on," Matt said and reached with his other hand into his coat pocket. A deep sigh exhaled through Rolfo's nostrils and he sat up straighter.

"I'd heard you were a great man. You'd been given a chance to kill, but you always did what you thought was good. I've heard you can be a forgiving man."

Matt pulled a single bullet from his pocket and slid it into one of the empty chambers. He closed one eye and gauged the dark spot in contrast to the light spots around it.

"You're a liar."

"Well I didn't believe—"

"Your beliefs don't matter; they have as much truth as those stories."

"I have one more."

"Shh. Have you ever heard I was from farther west, past the desert?"

The chair creaked as Rolfo slouched backward. "No, I hadn't heard that. Is it true?"

"It doesn't matter."

Matt clapped the facets of his gun back together and rotated the cylinder until the loaded chamber was obscured and ready to be fired.

"Have you ever been to the desert?"

"No."

"You've heard about it?"

"Just stories."

"That's good enough."

Rolfo looked up at his visitor. He blinked rapidly.

"They're just stories though."

"Whatever they said, it was true."

"How can you be certain?" "Because I crossed the desert with my brother."

"So you had a brother."

"We hired a guide."

"An Indian. ...I'd heard it was an Indian."

"A priest."

"Did he teach you about God?"

"He did. He told stories from the Good Book too. I had never killed before and we were following my brother's visions."

"He taught you about forgiveness."

"He called it atonement. And, yes, we talked about it."

Then Matt told his subject about the desert and Rolfo wept for he knew what gods inhabited this homestead now.

x.

i.

When Matt killed Rolfo he stood and asked Rolfo to kneel before him as if in confession. The font of tears running down the mayor's face revealed lines of whiteness underneath.

"Come on now," Matt said. And the shadows of his vestments blotted the man so he was only an illusion.

"Open your mouth so you can receive it," Matt said. He lifted the man's chin and inserted the barrel of the pistol.

There were whimpers and a couple mumbled words, followed by a short staccato burst. Teeth clacked against the metal of the barrel and a flap of scalp flipped up in the back of the man's head. It wasn't until Matt kicked the body with his boot that it fell over and began to bleed.

Neighbors arrived soon enough and found their sheriff standing over the corpse. Light smoky haze hung nearly stagnant in the room. Bits of bone meal and clumps of hair bound together with dimpled scalp were already drying and staining the floor boards. Bullets were strewn about. Onlookers gasped at the sight, the stronger of whom stated it was a mess.

"Killed himself," Matt said. "Walked in on it."

No one questioned where the gun he used was.

In the early morning, Matt staggered back to the jail where his captives sat awake and silent, ready for the oncoming resolution of their lives. The man stared down at his own feet. The woman locked her eyes on Matt. She said nothing.

"Well," Matt said after a minute of fumbling around at the desk, "today should be it."

"Yeah."

He took the keys from the desk drawer and unlocked the cells—first the woman's, then the man's.

"Should probably shackle us up," the woman said.

Matt shook his head. "No, I'm letting you both go."

"How's that?" the man asked. He looked at the sheriff.

"You done enough time here," Matt said. "Now you got to go and do some more time out there."

Like children startled into wakefulness, the captives came from their cells and embraced one another. The man regarded his benefactor with a brooding dark-eyed stare, while his woman, still sore with ravage, looked upon him with favor and thanked him.

"Go," Matt said and spurned them from their limbo, telling them to sin no more.

ii.

Because no one knew what to without the mayor, the citizens of St. John turned to their sheriff, who declared a martial law on the town. Trains were ordered to reroute; if they could not go by another route, they were to steam through the place without stopping. Men were told to not leave town without permission.

Some of the more prominent shopkeepers questioned the new authority's judgment, saying he was a tyrant. But some came to Matt's defense. They stated that nearly all the laws, the restrictions and curfew imposed on them over the years of developing their hamlet, were now lifted. They were free to do what they willed in the confines of their

environment. The lax hand of the powers that be did not clench them, did not guide them, and did not cover their eyes.

Townspeople took little notice when their sheriff moved himself into the former residence of the mayors Roar. In a peculiar way, the power Matt had as the sole sovereign over the town made him less conspicuous to the ordinary man: though he existed in the flesh, his presence permeated everything; his authority rooted in a mysticism not yet developed in the minds of his blind followers. If there was an edict a commoner did not agree with, there was none to intercede—the sheriff-ruler simply stood apart from his fellow man.

For most of his time spent alone, Matt watched his inhabitants from the window of his new residence. He found a pair of glasses with thick lenses, with the power to magnify things to the point of distortion. One earpiece was bent so when he wore them they sat precariously on the end of his nose and crooked across his face. He concluded the spectacles must have belonged to the senior Mayor Roar, and he wore them himself.

At night he braced a chair against the back door of the homestead and slept on the floor by the front door. He did not burn a fire in the hearth, nor did he light a lamp for the window. If he awoke with the urge to urinate, he scuttled across the floor below the level of the window sills and relieved himself in the corner kitchen cabinet.

The people of St. John awaited Matt's decision to elect a new mayor, but no such announcement came. Time passed and while some of the citizens grew impatient and complained about the lack of order, others said the town governed itself just fine.

Some days Matt waited until it was evening, when the shadows cast themselves long and gangled, and he walked to the jailhouse. He spoke to no one and no one spoke with him. He carried his pistol drawn and cocked until he was safe inside the jailhouse, behind the bolted door and in the company of his deputies. One of the deputies, who had grown accustomed to Matt's conditions, poured his sheriff a glass of whisky.

"You," Matt said and pointed his pistol at one of the three deputies. "Who in the hell are you?" "Me?"

He thumbed back the hammer of the pistol and it clicked. He drank down the last of his whiskey, eyeing the deputy over the rim of his glass the entire time.

"I'm deputy—" "Since when've you been here?"

"While now.... Do you mean here today?"

Matt adjusted his spectacles and blinked the monstrosities of his eyes. "I mean, do I know you?"

"Yessir."

"Leave."

The other two deputies stayed silent as the unrecognized one filed out of the jailhouse.

"Lock that door," Matt ordered. The men did as they were told.

"Deputy Escher," Matt said. "Is there anything I need to know?"

Deputy Escher stood ramrod straight. He spoke and his voice did not waver. "One of the whores got raped on the street the other night. Got tore up pretty bad. Jake—he owns her—says she's worthless now. Too loose, a goddamned mess."

"Oh."

"He thinks it was Pinky, the stable boy at the livery. But we got another whore sayin' no way it was Pinky."

The second deputy said he spoke with the other whores. None had anything helpful to say.

"What should we do about it?"

Matt poured another half glass of whisky and the bottle was empty. "Anything else happen?"

"With the whores?"

"Just in general."

"Yeah... a few things. It's been a while since you've come by."

"Well..."

Deputy Escher cut in, "There was that gunfight."

"A gunfight." "You didn't hear it?"

"No."

"It was right near the—your house."

"That so?"

"Yeah. We're gonna charge the surviving one with murder. Apparently it was a horse deal gone south and some guns got drawn. Woman got caught in the crossfire, took a bullet clean through her windpipe, dead before she hit the ground." "Hm." Matt drank down all the remaining elixir in his cup.

"...Sheriff, we need to know what to do here."

"Arrest them."

"Who?" "The guilty."

"Who's guilty? There's not been a trial. The judge isn't due around for another month yet."

Matt looked out the jail windows, between the stripes of rod iron bars. There was an abandoned wagon sitting in the street.

"Everyone—the jury, the defendants and accusers, even the judge—ends up dirty after a trial. Go get those responsible, the ones who'll soil us all, and bring them here."

"Sir?"

"I'll stay here tonight," Matt said. "You just go get whoever deserves to be delivered."

But the deputies did not return. They did not return that day, nor the next day, nor the one following that. Whether they came back held no bearing over how Matt governed the men beneath him. Anymore, he only held himself in counsel. He drank from his flask until his voice became unlike his own.

"You should let them do as they want, give the brutes freedom," the huskier voice said.

Another voice not his own, retorted. "But you're entrusted. You're the one who's supposed to take care of them, those people you call brutes."

"And how was I entrusted? There was no other choice."

He mock frowned and bobbed his head from side to side as if pondering his own counter philosophy. He drained the last contents of his flask into his mouth as he tilted his head back like a font. He swallowed hard. His voice once again grew huskier with ale.

"They"—and he pointed to the empty cells of the jailhouse—"didn't have a choice. ...But you did. You chose."

He laughed. He laughed to the point of where he no longer breathed, but hyperventilated. He crumpled to the floor. He tried to drink from his flask and upon finding it empty, he threw it across the room.

"You owe them nothing," he said. He waited for a reply, but none came. In the empty moments while he awaited his own answer, Matt grabbed at his stomach. "You owe them nothing," he said again. The voice speaking was that of the sober sheriff. And then, as if never drunk at all, he rose to his feet and looked out the windows, through the iron bars and into the night. Torches lining the street lit the

storefronts. A few of the eateries remained open; the saloon would still be open too.

Slowly, he unlocked the bolt and clutched the doorknob, turning it until the door parted from the frame and fresh air blew in. Then he eased the door shut again and locked it. He ran his fingers through the thick mat of hair on his head and sank back down to the floor.

On all fours, he crawled about the jailhouse, looking for vestiges of food. He found fruit rinds beneath the bed in one of the cells. Under his desk lay a slice of bread hardened and shrunk with age. After he doused the lamp and locked himself in a cell, he ate his findings eagerly like a troglodyte awaiting revelation.

iii.

He was in the middle of dreaming when the cramping awoke him. From the center of his gut came a terrible binding pain. His legs pulled up to his chest as if trying to squeeze out the pain. There was the desire to yelp out his feelings of pain, but instead he groaned between gritted teeth. Futilely his hands pulled at the shirt he wore as if it were the source of the discomfort. He fell

from the bench bed to the floor and did not call out in pain.

On the floor he began to pull at his shirt more vigorously until he'd torn it completely from his body. His legs kicked over the boarded floor of the cell and he groaned louder. Then, there was a sudden relief and warmth spread around the seat of his trousers. The rank scent of excrement hung in the air.

Matt lay still for a moment, then unbuckled his belt and shed his pants. Then he stood naked in the cell, the feces stuck to his leg.

"I owe them nothing," he said. And he used his hand to scrap the feces from his leg and he threw the fecal matter through the bars of his cage at the posters of wanted men tacked to the wall.

"I gave you freedom," he sang. "I gave you freedom—free-dom!"

He clapped and did a jig. He farted and laughed.

Then, in the darkness, he began to search the pockets of his clothes for the key. He found the key in his shirt pocket and unlocked his cell. The air outside of his cell caused bumps to stipple his skin, caused his genitals to shrink. The smell of the excrement seemed less fresh and

more acrid. He took his long coat down from the peg on the wall and wrapped it around his body. Then he took a bandolier of bullets and wrapped it around his waist, the pistol hanging heavy on his right side.

After he unlocked the door, he whispered to himself and it was neither in speech, nor in song—it was a chant he recounted from a different age—and he opened the door. The streets, the town, was quiet. He scanned the window fronts of the shops, of the hotel, the saloons, but there were no lights to be found.

"I've done it," Matt said. "I am everything."

He left the door of the jailhouse door hanging open and he strolled to the mayor's homestead. Before he locked himself in the homestead there was a billow of laughter from the darkness and Matt cursed to himself and slammed the door shut.

XI.

i

The wanderer came to the door of the Roar homestead, but dared not knock on the door. Rather he waited until the man who inhabited the seemingly vacant structure pushed the door ajar. The porch was unlit, but the stranger could see

the barrel of a pistol poke out from the gap in the doorway.

"Evenin'," the wanderer said.

"What are you?" the voice asked from the other side.

"I'm lookin' to stay somewhere. I'm just passin' through."

"You, what are you?" "Please, let me in," the man said. He stepped toward the parting in the door. In his hand he held a gunny sack.

The door creaked open and Matt stepped aside. The sole source of light came from the fissured cracks in the stove. The lines of heat burnt red like splinters of morning shining down to nighttime hell.

"Suppose you want light," Matt said.

He fidgeted with something in the abyss, scraps of metal on metal, then dull clattering. He coughed.

"No," the stranger answered and sat on the floor.

"Just came to find a place to rest for the night."

"There's an inn, y'know."

"I have no money."

Then there was silence. And the silence continued until neither man—the law nor the wanderer—could tell which world he inhabited.

The next morning Matt woke to the stranger preparing coffee in the kitchen. The man moved with certainty around the room as if he had lived here before. Odors from the dirty and molding dishes, the urine-soaked cabinet, did not disturb the stranger.

"Kind of you to let me stay here," the man said.

Matt continued to lie on the floor. He examined the locks on the door, and after seeing them latched, he rose. Curtains drawn shut over the windows filtered in a dull glow and cast amorphous shadows over the homestead interior.

"How you like your coffee?"

"Dark. Nothing in it." The stranger nodded, almost smiling, and poured the brew into the two cups. He offered a cup to Matt and the sheriff drank deeply without letting the liquid cool.

"Why're you here?"

"Got as much right as any other man to be here."

Matt shook his head, so his eyes warbled in the lenses of his spectacles. "No, why are you passing through St. John?"

"The way I was headin' I guess. Didn't plan it out."

Without consulting one another, the two men took their respective seats in the den, the same seats once occupied by Matt and the mayors.

"You've been all over," Matt said.

"That's right."

"Seen a lot."

"Yeah."

"You ever been out to the desert?"

"Certainly."

Both men drank from their cups.

"Which deserts?" Matt finally asked.

"All of 'em. been out west, in that desert. Been in the southern wastelands. Been in the cactus desert down near Mexico, Baja."

"Never heard of it."

"Strange place."

"How's that?"

The room seemed still, a frozen universe of its own, as the stranger spoke. Outside, the bustling and toil of the streets subsided to his speech.

"Got these cactus, big as men, bigger. Thousands of them. Doesn't look like the deserts up north of there. Not barren. ...Sometimes you hear these old timers, they say

there's water in a plant like that. But you run out of water and start to work on one of those trees, it's like butchering a cadaver, bones and all. End up pouring out more sweat than you can drink."

"You were down there?" "Yeah. That's right."

"How'd you make it out, if you didn't drink from the cactus?"

The stranger crossed his legs and sipped on his beverage. "Made it through the desert same as any man."

Neither man spoke for a while. Each pretended to be deep in thought. They finished drinking at the same time and held their empty cups in their hands.

"I'll tell you," the stranger said, "I rarely in my travels seen anything like this."

"Like what?"

"Well I came in your town later, past midnight I reckon."

Matt agreed it was late since the stranger disturbed his sleep and he never fell to sleep before midnight anymore.

"There was men still awake, which is nothing unusual. Towns are like people, they got personalities, never know how they'll take to strangers. So I kept to the shadows. As

it ended out, no one paid me any mind. A fella I ran into in an ally wouldn't stop givin' it to this woman. I tipped him my hat. The woman kept on squealin', tellin' him not to do it so hard."

"This was out on the streets?"

"Just about. There's more. I stopped at the bar, the barman told me it was one of the oldest such places around here. Two men there got into a fight, which is fairly respectable, a good fistfight. But then the bigger of the two of these men takes up a liquor bottle and smashes it over the other one's head and used the broken end to gut the man. When he was done and the bloodied man lay on the floor, two others took his money, watch and boots. He was still bleedin' out. He cried out for his father. To stop the commotion, the barman came out from around the counter and stuffed a rag into the poor gutted fella's mouth and rolled his body out the door into the street. Once all returned to normal, I asked the barman where I could ask to stay and he told me to come here. By the time I'd left the bar and went out into the street, the now-dead man had been stripped naked, except for the shredded and bloody shirt."

"This happened last night?"

"It did. I haven't any reason to lie to you, sheriff. I'm just telling you about the world you've been missing."

Matt removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, where the spectacles rubbed the skin red and raw.

"Must be why I stay in here so much."

The wanderer disagreed politely. Matt looked at the man with the hindrance of the spectacles and saw the man looked intently at the blood stain splashed on the hardwood floor.

"Things happen inside too," the wanderer said.

"Outside looks grim and ugly, but inside there's blood."

As if he understood, Matt nodded his head. "Fella that was here before—he was mayor—he killed himself."

"Certainly," agreed the strange wanderer. He smiled the same bemused grin he had before.

"I walked in on him doing it, killing himself. Stuck the gun right into his mouth and—"

"There was a time," the stranger said, "when I crossed the wastelands down near Mexico. I traveled with a group of showmen, performers some might say. If you travel with performers you'll find they are authentic men—they feign nothing. I found this out."

"There were a half-dozen men, three of them musicians, horn players. About a dozen head of pack mule, donkey and horse combined, a wagon full of supplies and such. One man, the manager, was a shootist. Could pop a bottle off the top of his woman's pretty head. People'd pay to see this, y'know."

Silently, Matt agreed.

"The woman, the manager's woman, was a beauty with long hair and smooth skin. Wherever she was, she'd be layered in a dress. Coulda made more money if she'd shown more skin.

"Had another man, a sideshow man who had cages full of unnatural things: two-headed snakes, a white frog with red eyes, a bird born without a beak. The bird'd make a terrible noise when it tried to squawk. Late at night he'd lie awake, playing like a child with all his creatures. He talked to them like a mother coos at her newborns. Meanwhile, these things were hissing and croaking and squawking. ...Another part of the sideshow was this bearded woman. She was really a man—had the man parts anyways, but a chest like a woman. She kept a nigger baby in a cage and when they went to a town, the sideshow man would charge a penny to see the child nurse on the bearded thing's tit. As

long as I travelled with them, that baby never did grow. It was like it was cursed to be forever an infant, suckling on a man's tit.

"I traveled with them night after night, building fire after fire, a series of lightnesses and darknesses. We came to pass through the wastelands; but our path had been miscalculated and our supplies thus depleted. We found ourselves—a small band of degenerate humans—very much sober and very much lost in the cactus desert I told you of."

Without his spectacles, Matt squinted at the stranger set before him. "I thought you said you crossed the desert same as any man."

"I did," replied the stranger. "I crossed with other men. It's easier that way. The musicians, the minstrels, whatever they were, left us. They probably turned back when he first said we'd gone astray. They left their instruments on a rock, a conglomeration of twisted brass pipings. It was so hot the metals melted and bonded together and amassed like an idol to a misunderstood god. It's all that was left of them."

"But you were out of supplies."

"Yes."

"Your canteens were dry."

"Yes. There were the cactuses though."

"I thought you said it took more sweat to get the water out of those than there was liquid."

Again, the stranger agreed. "Since there was fuel aplenty in this place, we still built our fires. Had someone been tracking us from above our path would appear as a long line of fires, each burning brighter than the last, until you came upon where we temporarily lived, dancing around the flames, eating the unnatural sideshow beasts.

"The sideshow man, of course, did not take part in the slaughter and did not eat their flesh or drink their blood. He cried when the nigger child was killed and prepared in thick scraps baked on a flat rock. And because he did not eat, he perished and we ate him too. With our bellies full, we all slept soundly. When I awoke, the shootist had taken the wagon, his woman and our last pack mule. Whether he made it to the ocean town we were looking for, I do not know." "He left you in the desert?"

"Me and the bearded woman."

"He took everything?" "Yes. Everything he'd given us just the night before went with him. He left us with only each other and a stock of still-greasy bones. The woman and I wandered on together; we followed an arroyo

into a gulch, where only the biggest of the cactus thrived. It was midday and I had so little to drink I could no longer sweat myself. The woman had a parasol, a frilly thing, to protect her from the sun. I took it and fashioned it into a pick by wearing down the handle into a sharpened hook. I told her to begin working on the cactus and I would take over halfway through. I hunkered in close the plant, trying to stay in its slender shadow. She swung the parasol and cut deep into the cactus. She swung and swung, cutting a wedge into the plant. Then, when the shadow of the cactus grew longer and rotated out to the side, she asked if I would take over. I laughed because now she needed the water more than me. She threatened to kill me, beat me to death, cut me up. I laughed at that too—she'd be parched and dead herself from killing me, and I told her this.

"She stripped out of her clothes and that's how I came to find that she was really a man. I continued my slow movement, staying inside the shadow of the cactus. Finally the breasted, bearded man collapsed dead. I suckled on his tit like a babe and set to work, taking up the crude tool I had fashioned and swung it only twice more before the bitter water of the cactus flowed out in a trickle. I put my mouth to the source and drank until content."

Matt did not move in his chair, he did not drink his coffee. He did not blink. "How'd you make it out of the desert?"

"Same as I come into it: I traced my route back, traveling through the night, and in the morning finding the charred logs, the cold ashes of our past fires."

"Why didn't you go on, try to make it out of the other side of the desert?"

The stranger shook his head. "There is no end to the desert. It goes on and on, without end, devouring everything that comes after it."

For a while the men said nothing. Matt blinked a couple of times, but did not otherwise move. The stranger adjusted himself in the chair restlessly. He sipped at the wet grounds of coffee littering the bottom of his cup.

"I should be movin' on," he said.

Matt nodded.

The stranger stood and walked to where the blood stain marred the floor its darkest. He ran the toe of his boot over the mark.

"You should give me some money," he said.

"Yeah." Matt rose from his chair and walked to the kitchen, to where he stored a jar of coins. He kept his back to the stranger, closed his eyes and stood silently.

"The money," the stranger said.

Opening his eyes, Matt took two coins from the jar. As he set them in the stranger's hand, his guest smiled.

"Is this enough?"

In his hand the strange wanderer weighed the coins as if their value was metric, rather than minted. "Yes," he said and his smile grew broader. "You can give me the other half you owe when we see each other again."

The man picked up his gunny sack and pocketed the coins. He opened the front door of the homestead and the light blared from outside. Matt squinted and heard the wanderer and he heard the man say, "Your brother..."

"What about him?" He shielded his eyes.

"Your brother is blind."

The wanderer began to walk away. "Did he send you here?"

"Nobody sends me, I just come."

"Then where are you headin'?"

As he approached the doorway, Matt saw less of the wanderer and heard more of the town.

"I'm going north," the man said. "To see the unspoiled beauty there."

He chortled deep in his throat and walked until he could be seen no more.

ii.

At his porch railing, Matt tried to steady himself. His vision adjusted to the light. Indeed the wanderer had gone. A stagnant cloud of dust hung over the street, manifesting the sun's rays in its clout. At the far end of the street, in front of the general store, a barrel of grease had been set aflame. Several men danced around it, throwing various items into the fire. The man who owned the general store stood cross-armed as a silent witness. There was broken glass on the ground and even the barefooted fool of the bunch did not seem to notice it.

Across the street from the men, a woman sat backwards on her red horse, leaning against the horn of the saddle. Her legs were crossed at the thighs and the stretches of skin from her knees down were exposed. A line of men formed, each holding a half-penny in his hand. They paid the woman to cross and uncross her legs while they watched. The horse began to urinate while one man paid his pence.

The town moved, drunks crossed the street in front of oncoming wagons; the wagons veering close to the hay bales stacked against the closed-down bank. Somewhere beyond the commotion, the smoke and the dust, there was a church. Perhaps the construction had never been completed on it with all the newer buildings going up, the roof lumber had been borrowed to construct the gallows. In the foreground a boy rode a horse. The horse appeared too large for the tiny figure who rode upon it. The woman on the horse called out to him by a name that was not his. The men circling the fire jeered at him, but did not advance on him—they were drawn like insects to the incandescent destruction. The boy and his horse trod on, the hooves of the beast plodding mutely along the dusted streets. Then from somewhere beyond, somewhere unknown, there was a gunshot. And the boy fell dead, hardly bloodied, but dead all the same. Other children, clothed in rags, ran to the scene of the fallen boy. They rifled through his pockets and stripped him of the clothing and hat, his boots. The horse, unaffected by the rabble, continued on. The child who stole the bloodied shirt took it over to the fire. He threw it into the flames and the fire burned hotter, brighter and the smoke it

produced billowed darker. A chorus of drunken whoops from the men resounded and the boy joined in their dance.

Matt wrangled the loose horse as he had done generations before on the island ranch. No one took note of the hermit sheriff's appearance and they continued about their antics. Out to the west the sun grew large and deep in color, glowering above the horizon as if at any moment it would collide with this planet and set all into inferno.

"There, there," Matt said, stroking the horse's muzzle. He lashed the reins of the animal onto his porch railing. He went back into the homestead. He found his pistol and loaded it full of bullets. From a cabinet he took the scrapped remains of the bounty book. He stuffed it into a satchel. Before leaving the house, Matt emptied his jar of coins, setting two pieces on the credenza for whoever might find them. He pulled on his boots, the leather tubings stretched to formlessness.

He left the front door open and saddled the horse with his satchel.

He rode out of St. John, out of the place stricken with pandemonium, the locomotion of hysteria and depravity. He looked down on his subjects—the muses and jesters all—

dancing in the streets, in the whorehouse beds, with their guns and New England hardwares, dressed lavishly and raggedly and not at all. He rode through the groundlings; those who did cast a gaze up at him did so without fear or reverence; they did so with indifference. Around the sheriff the heathenistic rabble surged: from the mouths of fools and harlots, from the bastard children left to run amok on the barren streets, from the approaching train rattling the window panes. He rode on. Those who knew his name did not say it, and none asked where he was going. And before he'd even left the town limits—while the train hindered his progress and blotted the sun off and on—he smelled the arsonist smoke wafting from the house he'd left them and mixing with that of the locomotive. The people cackled and roasted meat on the spits made from scrapped lumber and stray nails. The final cars of the train passed and in their absence, he was deafened. Prairie, plaintive and basking in the last lit hours, stretched out in every direction, save behind him. And he rode.

Epilogue

Last I looked out over creation, it was the damnedest thing I ever did see. Rode that horse of mine—Glad was her name—rode her right up to the top of the bluff and looked out into the storm. Came at me like a wall of smoke and fire and water, it did. Felt Glad buck up under me a bit. Said whoa a couple a times, but it didn't do no good. She brayed and bucked, gone wild when she was put up against the storm. Some of us is made for these things, some ain't. Some men is meant for dying. Others is made for killing. I's the go-between, I suppose.

Hard to remember now what I was thinking when I took off in that storm like I did. I think I figured if I could get up to the top of that slough I could talk with God again. Been a while since I heard his voice. Figured I could get up high enough and when the sky flashed I could see out across all of creation, across all of time. Guess my mind was wild as my horse. Thought I could see the island, see the blood washing across the desert, the trains of Aurora and the paths Matt carved out on his way to St. John. Could plot out the places I been by looking for the ruins of places where people done gathered.

Know it sounds crazy, it's something I never told Marie, certainly nothing I told Doctor-the-Former-Reverend, but for a second I did see it all. A calm came over Glad and she snuffled. A roll of thunder grumbled long and angry and the sky mottled in these shades of slate and black and gray. I called out like I did so long ago when I was on that island, called out for God to show the way. Couldn't hear my voice through all the commotion.

For a few seconds there was only rain, sheets of it. Enough rain to drown a man just trying to breath. Then the sky went alight and I saw. My mouth done tasted like copper and it felt like I had sand in my eyes. My mouth clapped shut and there was a bang like a gunshot. Sounded like any other gunshot—the one where I done killed that man in the cabin or the one where Matt made short work of that father and his boy. I saw them all, saw all the earth, every place in every time, my brother and me killing our way through them. I saw all the whole world—towns like deserts, sand like snow, my brother like me.

Then there was nothing.

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